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THE NEW YORKER

FEBRUARY 3, 2020

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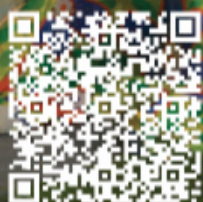
Christoph Niemann "Whiteout"

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ed Caesar (*"The Rock,"* p. 32), a contributing writer, is the author of "Two Hours." He will publish "The Moth and the Mountain" later this year.

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Samantha Irby (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 25) is a writer and a comedian. She will publish "Wow, No Thank You" in March.

Dmitri Prigov (*Poem*, p. 40), who died in 2007, was a founding figure of the Moscow Conceptualist movement. "Soviet Texts," a selection of his writings, translated by Simon Schuchat with Ainsley Morse, comes out in February.

Doreen St. Félix (*On Television*, p. 76), a staff writer since 2017, recently became the magazine's television critic.

Jill Lepore (*"In Every Dark Hour,"* p. 20) is a professor of history at Harvard. Her books include "This America" and "These Truths."

David Rabe (*Fiction*, p. 56) is the author of numerous plays, screenplays, and works of fiction. His most recent novel is "Girl by the Road at Night."

Roz Chast (*Sketchbook*, p. 51), a *New Yorker* cartoonist since 1978, recently published, with Patricia Marx, "You Can Only Yell at Me for One Thing at a Time: Rules for Couples."

Christoph Niemann (*Cover*) has published several books, including "Sunday Sketching," "Souvenir," and "Hopes and Dreams." This is his thirtieth cover for the magazine.

Camille Rankine (*Poem*, p. 61) is the author of the poetry collection "Incorrect Merciful Impulses."

Tim Struby (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 19), a journalist based in New York City, is at work on his first novel.

THIS YEAR ON NEWYORKER.COM

The Future of Democracy

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CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

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THE MAIL

ODYSSEUS IN SPAIN

I read with interest Giles Harvey's piece about the Spanish novelist Javier Cercas's long struggle with the "historical memory" of Francisco Franco's reign (*A Critic at Large*, January 13th). "D.I.Y. history," as Harvey calls it, is alive and well in Spain, in spite of historians' warnings against its anti-intellectualism and, worse, its use in the service of political goals. Cercas himself, fed up with the predictable vitriol over the Civil War, has joined the detractors even as he continues to write about Spain's turbulent past. Cercas's case is compelling in the age of fake history and fake news: he is something of an Everyman, whose narrator insists on getting the story right, plowing through archives and tracking down eyewitnesses. Cercas's history-fictions are models for members of any civil society who want to find out what truly happened. Such inquiry may well become a weapon of vengeance, but it is central to the creation of a democratic society.

*Michael Ugarte
Columbia, Mo.*

Harvey's review of Cercas's work, though perceptive and brilliantly written, offers Cercas's flawed interpretation of a classical analogy without correcting the record. Cercas's narrator asserts that, despite efforts to the contrary, he has become "ordinary Odysseus, not glorious Achilles." In his mind, Achilles died nobly for his cause, while Odysseus lived a "long and mediocre and happy life." This is a misreading of Odysseus. First, the hero is doomed to roam the world for ten years, fighting for his life as his crew members die horrible deaths. Upon his return to Ithaca, he must kill a hundred and eight suitors who have overrun his home and plotted to kill his son. Borrowing Emily Wilson's new adjective for Odysseus, his life is rather more "complicated" than "mediocre" or "happy." This is important, because the comparison as written understates the nuance and the audacity of Cercas's own literary odyssey. It would be cruel to suggest that his works evince only safe, slow

prudence. Perhaps a better analogue for them is Tennyson's view of Odysseus: "strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

*Dennis Donnelly
Englewood, N.J.*

THE EQUALITY DEBATE

Joshua Rothman examines many perspectives on what it means to create an equal society ("Same Difference," January 13th). I wonder whether, for those seeking progress, equality of opportunity should be the focal point. The concept implicitly acknowledges that although we are not all created equal, we should all have the chance to attain satisfaction in life. Rothman considers whether a child who is going blind should receive a larger share of an inheritance than her siblings. I lost my vision at the age of thirteen. The special instruction I received in the years that followed enabled me to attend college and law school. I may not be equal in a physical sense, but Connecticut's public-education system enabled me to pursue my career. Of course, one person's opportunity could be another's closed door, for any number of reasons. Still, equality of opportunity is a good place to start.

*Adrian Spratt
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Rothman suggests that "equality, desert, reciprocity, and need" all have a function in society. As an experienced choral director, I uphold high performance standards while creating a welcome environment for less talented singers. Not everyone deserves a solo, and following a code of conduct is mandatory. But everyone may audition, and all are given the benefit of the doubt, because we all need to sing.

*Nancy Gifford
Doylestown, Pa.*

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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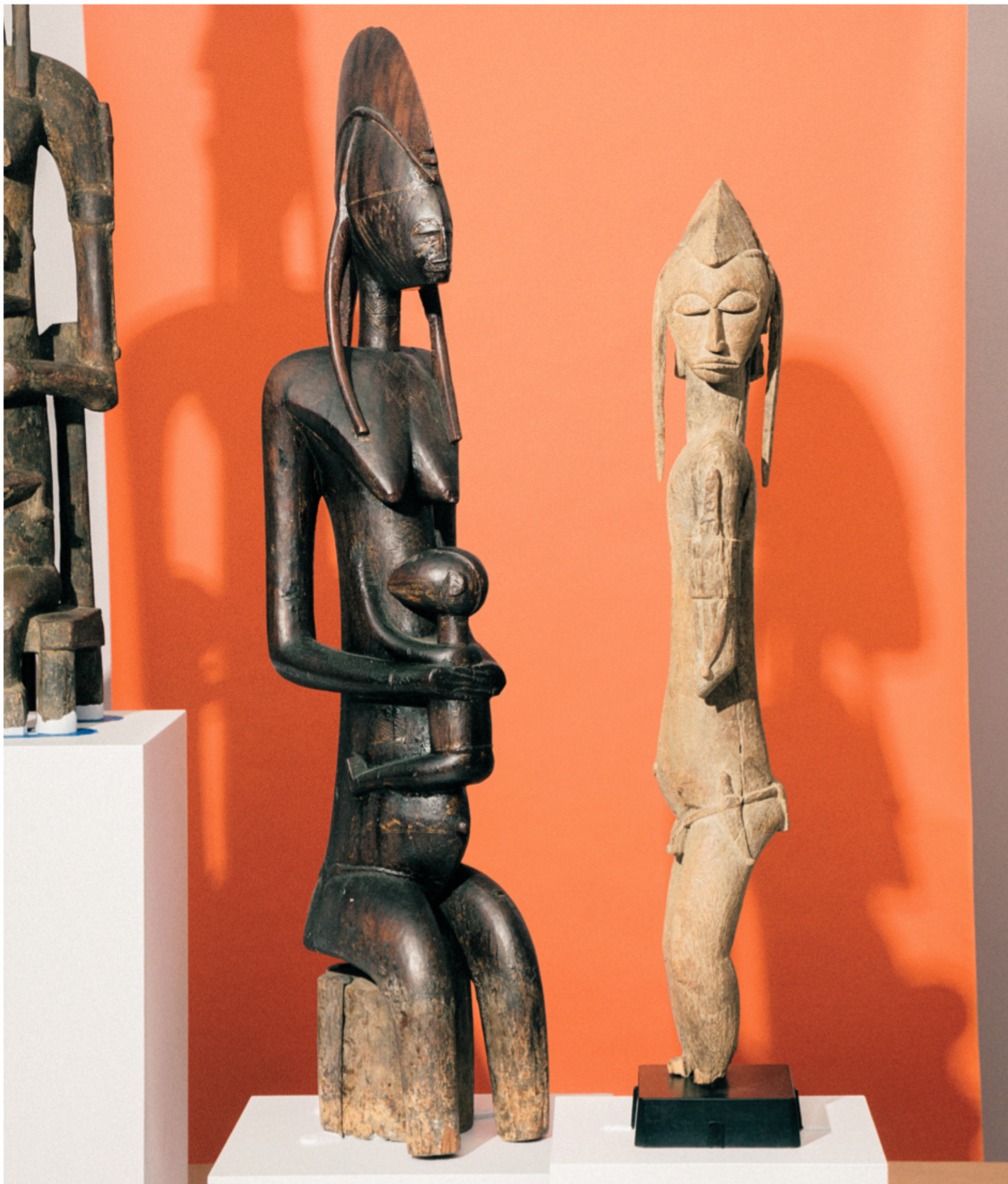
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JANUARY 29 – FEBRUARY 4, 2020

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



“Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara,” which opens on Jan. 30 at the Met, tells the epic story of a network of African cultures that flourished, from the fourth century through the nineteenth, in the vast region that now encompasses Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Among the two hundred treasures on view—in wood, stone, gold, ceramic, bronze, cloth, and more—are the magnificent figures pictured above, of a mother and child and a man with a turned head, both made by the Bamana people of Mali.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

iann dior

Gramercy Theatre

When iann dior seemingly appeared like magic last year, with millions of streams on SoundCloud, accusations that he was an industry plant—an artist whose rise is facilitated by corporate entities instead of by hustle and organic buzz—swiftly followed. Rather than mount any real defense, the rapper embraced the skepticism and named his debut album, well, “Industry Plant.” The release, from November, navigates the murky, lovelorn waters of emo rap with impressive proficiency, as dior stands to potentially become the next star purveyor of the style.—*Briana Younger* (Jan. 29.)

Vijay Iyer

Jazz Standard

For the pianist and composer Vijay Iyer, juggling disparate ensembles and musical contexts seems to come as naturally—and be as necessary—as breathing. He leaves his celebrated sextet at home for this four-night stint, which he kicks off with a solo performance before mixing things up with a trio that features two acclaimed improvisers—the bassist Linda May Han Oh and the drummer Tyshawn Sorey. On the final night, the trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, with whom Iyer recorded the marvellous duet “A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke,” joins Iyer and Sorey, with the bassist Stephan Crump in tow.—*Steve Futterman* (Jan. 29-Feb. 1.)

Molly Nilsson

The Market Hotel

From her base in Berlin, the Swedish singer-songwriter Molly Nilsson quietly releases gloomy synth pop for misanthropes. “Now I’m at the party and I hate everyone,” she announces on “Whiskey Sour,” a sulky standout from 2008. Still, subtle touches reveal her idealism: “Every Night Is New,” the shimmery opener of her latest album, “2020,” references a wistful song she wrote ten years ago about staring up at the night sky alone. “Hey moon,” she says a decade later, “I never lost faith in you. Every night is new.”—*Julysa Lopez* (Jan. 30.)

Frances Quinlan

The Sultan Room

In the quartet Hop Along, Frances Quinlan performs quietly ambitious indie-rock songs, her every lyrical knot presented as a plaintive confessional. “Likewise,” the Philadelphia singer’s opening bid under her own name, stalks similar ground while broadening her instrumental battery to incorporate a synthesizer, a harp, and field recordings. The fancified soundscape foregrounds an artistic mindfulness that extends to the images Quinlan created for the album cover, which she displays

at a pop-up exhibition and Q. & A. at Selina Chelsea, on Jan. 29.—*Jay Ruttenberg* (Jan. 30.)

Seratonos

Rough Trade NYC

Last year, the Seratonos released “POWER,” an album that marked an evolution for the group of raucous, unpredictable kids from Louisiana who riffed off soul and punk with explosive cheer. Their edges aren’t quite as serrated, but some refinements in their sound—particularly the voice of AJ Haynes, who grew up performing in a Baptist church—boost their musicianship. Though the band doesn’t completely ditch streaks of noisy recklessness, such moments are undergirded by a newfound sense of maturity.—*J.L.* (Jan. 30.)

The Wood Brothers

Webster Hall

If there is an added slackness to the Wood Brothers’ new LP, “Kingdom in My Mind,” it comes with good cause: the Nashville band began recording the album almost by accident, intending merely to sound out their new studio. The bagginess suits this fluid trio, which stars the brothers Oliver and Chris Wood (the latter

of jazz’s jam-world ambassadors Medeski Martin & Wood), plus a non-sibling ringer, Jano Rix. They breezily piece together varied strains of American roots music, rarely revealing the stitches.—*J.R.* (Jan. 30-31.)

“Transformation”

Rose Theatre

Glenn Close may be quite the versatile artist, but it’s still unexpected to find her performing with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in a multimedia piece composed by Ted Nash, a Grammy-winning saxophone stalwart. Blending poetry (curated by Close), dance, and jazz, “Transformation” features guest appearances by John Cameron Mitchell, Amy Irving, and Justin Vivian Bond.—*S.F.* (Jan. 30-Feb. 1.)

Jane Fitz

Nowadays

There’s a searching, dawn-over-the-horizon aspect to the London d.j. Jane Fitz’s selections that makes her an ideal dance-festival closer, a role she’s taken on with increasing regularity in the past few years. That sensibility holds whether she’s playing soulful, bass-heavy deep house or giddy, gibbering psytrance—two

HIP-HOP



As pop stars appeal to their fans to boost their music up the charts, **Roddy Ricch**—thanks to his supporters—emerged in recent weeks an unwitting villain, one whose rarefied position atop both the Hot 100 and the Billboard 200 threatened to keep such mainstays as Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez from those slots. The Compton rapper’s current single, “The Box,” is an earworm that showcases a playful command of melody and cadences; the elongated vowels in words such as “lazy,” “eighties,” and “soul” are ready-made for inebriated club sing-alongs. His debut album, “Please Excuse Me for Being Antisocial,” from December, brims with similar kinds of eccentricities, playing with pitch, flow, and emphasis in a manner on par with the best Young Thug disciples. Up against formidable competition in the pseudo-rivalry for No. 1, Roddy, who performs at Brooklyn Steel on Jan. 31, shines all the brighter.—*Briana Younger*

styles that typically occupy opposite ends of the dance-music taste spectrum but become cozy cousins in Fitz's hands. Here, the similarly sharp-eared New Yorker Lychee plays first.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Feb. 1.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Anne-Sophie Mutter

Carnegie Hall

Celebrations of Beethoven's sestercentennial are under way at Carnegie Hall, with the violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter presiding over an evening devoted to his chamber works. She and the pianist Lambert Orkis play through the joyous strains of the "Spring" Sonata and the prickly intensity of the "Kreutzer" Sonata, and the cellist Daniel Müller-Schott joins them for the "Ghost" Trio. Also playing: The conductor and scholar Leon Botstein, never one to make the obvious choice, honors Beethoven by leading the American Symphony Orchestra in pieces by Spohr, Liszt, and Reger that were inspired by the composer (Jan. 31 at 8).—*Oussama Zahr (Jan. 30 at 7.)*

New York Philharmonic

David Geffen Hall

Simone Young, the internationally renowned Australian conductor who stepped in to replace an injured Jaap van Zweden for a series of Philharmonic concerts last spring, returns with a program of her own. The centerpiece is a recent cello concerto by her countryman Brett Dean, with Alban Gerhardt as the soloist; two English staples surround that work—Britten's "Four Sea Interludes from 'Peter Grimes'" and Elgar's "Enigma Variations."—*Steve Smith (Jan. 30 at 7:30 and Jan. 31 at 11 A.M.)*

Simone Dinnerstein

Miller Theatre

Simone Dinnerstein's way with Bach at the piano is nimble and direct: she leans into shifts in counterpoint like a race-car driver hugging a track's curves. The gifted musician curates a three-part series of Bach's works for Miller Theatre, starting with four sonatas that find the Baroque master pairing busy keyboard passages with more mellifluous lines for a solo instrument. Dinnerstein is joined by the flutist Christina Jennings (Sonatas in B Minor and E-Flat Major), the violinist Rebecca Fischer (Sonata No. 4 in C Minor), and the cellist Alexis Pia Gerlach (Sonata No. 2 in D Major).—*O.Z. (Jan. 30 at 8.)*

counter)induction

Shapeshifter Lab

A restlessly inventive collective of composers and performers with an oddly unforgettable name, counter)induction celebrates its twentieth anniversary with what it calls a "satisfyingly strange" mix. Included are recent pieces by the ensemble members Kyle Bartlett, Douglas Boyce, Jessica Meyer, and Ryan Streber, along with three small works by the lutenist and countertenor Mark Rimple.—*S.S. (Jan. 31 at 7.)*

Peter Mattei

Carnegie Hall

The Swedish baritone Peter Mattei has a voice that envelops his every utterance in pillowy sound. It gives him a warm, three-dimensional presence in operatic comedies and lends a commanding, sympathetic tone in more haunting material, such as Berg's "Wozzeck," which he just wrapped at the Met. The latter quality lends itself to a rendition of Schubert's

desolate and disquieting song cycle "Winterreise," which Mattei performs with the pianist Lars David Nilsson at Zankel Hall. Also playing: The sui-generis vocalist and actor Titus Burgess honors Sondheim ahead of the Broadway legend's ninetieth birthday with a concert of his songs on Carnegie's main stage (Feb. 1 at 8), and the soprano Sally Matthews digs into the drama of pieces by Sibelius, Strauss, and Wagner at Weill Recital Hall (Feb. 4 at 7:30).—*O.Z. (Jan. 31 at 7:30.)*

Laurie Anderson

happylucky no.1

An opportunity to catch the celebrated performance artist, improviser, and storyteller Laurie Anderson in an intimate Crown Heights gallery space is so tantalizing that it really doesn't matter what she'll be doing. For this appearance, in addition to sharing her characteristically wry observations, Anderson takes up her violin in duets with two outstanding musicians—the electric-violin player Martha Mook and the percussionist Susie Ibarra.—*S.S. (Jan. 31-Feb. 1 at 8.)*

panSonus

St. John's in the Village

The impressive young duo panSonus comprises Amber Evans, a soprano, conductor, and composer, and Jon Clancy, a percussionist and sound artist. On the heels of an ambitious tour of Australia and New Zealand late last year, the pair regroups to showcase the music featured on that trek, including a slate of fresh sounds and new approaches by Zak Argabrite, Jakob Bragg, Lydia Wayne Chang, and Vasily Ratmanskyy.—*S.S. (Feb. 1 at 7:30.)*

Susan Graham

Alice Tully Hall

Schumann's "Frauenliebe und -leben" ("A Woman's Love and Life") is one of the only Romantic-era song cycles written specifically for piano and a female protagonist, and, as such, it gets plenty of play on recital programs. The splendid American mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, in collaboration with the pianist Malcolm Martineau, finds a new way into the work by breaking it down; she places each of Schumann's eight songs alongside pieces by other composers. The cycle's final song, to take one example, appears in a group with Berlioz's heavyhearted "Absence" and Quilter's elegantly simple "How Should I Your True Love Know," exploring mournfulness in different moods.—*O.Z. (Feb. 4 at 7:30.)*

Argento New Music Project

Areté Venue and Gallery

"Double Take," the latest offering by the Argento New Music Project, examines the notion of duality from varying perspectives. To open the concert, the vocalist Charmaine Lee and the clarinetist Carol McGonnell match extraordinary technique with lightning-fast reflexes in structured improvisation. Schoenberg's thrice-familiar "Verklärte Nacht" is contrasted with an earlier germinal sketch, "Toter Winkel," and Erin Gee's "Mouthpiece

IN CONCERT



If drag is the art of forging identity through excess, then it has a home in opera, which asks the human voice to do extravagant things in the name of feeling. The mezzo-soprano **Stephanie Blythe**, who has spent decades knocking listeners out of their seats with her gale-force vocals, has adopted the drag alter ego of **Blythely Oratonio**, who, according to his program bio, is "the tender, testosterone-filled tenor of the century." For this cabaret show at the Appel Room, on Jan. 30, the impressively bearded divo sings some of the greatest arias ever written (naturally) and pairs them (unnaturally) with musical-theatre and pop numbers. Oratonio's influences include glam, eighties rock, and Pavarotti, but really he just wants to tell you a little about himself.—*Oussama Zahr*

29,” from 2016, precedes the world première of a new elaboration, “Mouthpiece 29b.” (The program repeats on Feb. 5 at 7, at the Austrian Cultural Forum, in Manhattan.)—S.S. (Feb. 4 at 8.)

DANCE

New York City Ballet

David H. Koch

The company unveils “Voices,” the latest ballet by the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky. The music is drawn from “Voices and Piano,” a series of pieces in which the avant-garde Austrian composer Peter Ablinger mimics various speakers with pitches and rhythms played on the piano. The voices that Ratmansky has selected for his ballet include those of the painter Agnes Martin and the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad. All the main roles are danced by women. The program on which “Voices” will appear is strong, also including works by Christopher Wheeldon (“Polyphonia”), Justin Peck (“Bright”), and Jerome Robbins (“Opus 19/The Dreamer”). Wheeldon’s “Polyphonia,” from 2001, is one of his finest ballets—a suite for several couples, set to piano pieces by György Ligeti, filled with images of haunting, stark elegance.—*Marina Harss (Through March 1.)*

Melinda Ring

Danspace Project

A sort of sequel to “X,” Ring’s 2010 work at Danspace Project, “Strange Engagements” is intricately organized, though it may not always look so. A strong cast of five performers, including the self-possessed veteran Paul Hamilton, dances all out, mostly in silence, as if driven by some unheard music. A seeming free-for-all, loose and informal, it snaps in and out of unmistakable order, in unison or canonic imitation, and everyone’s stamina is tested.—*Brian Seibert (Jan. 30-Feb. 1.)*

Adam Linder

Museum of Modern Art

For the first commission in MOMA’s new Studio space—a live-performance gallery created during the building’s recent renovation—Adam Linder presents “Shelf Life.” He’s an Australian-born choreographer, trained in part at the Royal Ballet School, who now makes conceptual pieces for museums, often engaging in institutional critique. Here the idea is anatomical and alliterative: how blood and the brain relate to the barre, a dancer’s site of training and preparation. These dancers, whose own longevity differs from most works in a museum, perform three to five times daily through March 8.—*B.S. (Feb. 1-March 8.)*

Deborah Colker

Joyce Theatre

In “Cão Sem Plumas” (“Dog Without Feathers”), the prominent Rio-based Companhia de Dança Deborah Colker takes a trip to northeastern Brazil, along the Capibaribe River. The region appears glamorously in black-and-white

CONTEMPORARY DANCE



From the moment of its première in London, in 1995, “**Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake**” struck a chord. This tale about a lonely, forlorn prince and his dysfunctional family felt somehow relevant to real events. Prince Charles and Princess Diana were separating; Queen Elizabeth’s “annus horribilis” was just three years old. Bourne’s homoerotic twist on the story, by which its prince finds solace, and freedom, with a flock of male swans, was a vibrant manifesto of the beauty and power of male dancing, but also a liberating example of gay attraction on a ballet stage (all too rare, even to this day). Bourne’s swans were bare-chested and sexy, by turns tender and nasty. Twenty-five years later, the show is still on tour, and, with the popularity of “The Crown” and the drama of “Megxit,” its allusions to the machinations of palace bureaucrats—the Royal Family’s private secretary plays a significant role—are sure to resonate. “Swan Lake” returns to City Center, Jan. 30-Feb. 9, with a few tweaks and updated sets and costumes by Lez Brotherston. The Royal Ballet’s Matthew Ball alternates with Will Bozier and Max Westwell in the role of the Swan, the leader of the swan-men.—*Marina Harss*

film, directed by Colker and Cláudio Assis: cracked riverbeds, burning cane fields, and mangrove swamps, all ornamented with mud-caked dancers. Onstage, in mud-patterned unitards, the dancers move acrobatically but stick close to the ground, as if only half emerged from a state of nature. In a meandering travelogue of images, they take on aspects of herons, mangrove trees, a giant crab.—*B.S. (Feb. 4-9.)*

THE THEATRE

Emojiland

The Duke on 42nd Street

The producers of this musical comedy take pains to clarify that it has no relation to the almost universally loathed “The Emoji Movie,” from 2017, and for good reason: though both works accept the questionable assumption that

it’s compelling to imagine the inner lives of text-message symbols, only this show—written by Keith Harrison and Laura Schein, who also plays an emoji called Smize—is actually fun. Yes, the premise is insultingly dumb and much of the phone-based wordplay embarrassing, but, damn it, the cast, the designers, and the director, Thomas Caruso, sell it all so well that it’s hard not to enjoy. Particularly disarming are the transcendently goofy Lesli Margherita, as the vain, despotic Princess, and Lucas Steele, as the suicidal Skull, who, in the show’s most satisfying musical joke, sings a lot like Thom Yorke.—*Rollo Romig (Through March 19.)*

Grand Horizons

Hayes

Bess Wohl writes fluid comedies that are like sitcoms in tone and structure but hide a kernel of darkness within. Her latest, “Grand Horizons,” is her Broadway début and works



Everybody knows that, in Shakespeare's day, men played the women in his dramas and comedies until, in the sixteen-sixties, women began taking over themselves. I don't know how many actresses of color, though, have played Shakespeare's men before. If the number is large, forgive me. In any case, I don't regard the accomplished stage, television, and film performer Ruth Negga as a novelty in playing a man. And that's because Negga, who was born in Ethiopia to an Irish mother and an Ethiopian father, has proved, in the course of her career, that she can find what's human and individual in any part, even as she searches it for reflections of her own life. Her eyes tell us so much about her characters' inner lives that she gives two shows simultaneously—a visual display of interiority and the language that goes with it. In the title role of Yaël Farber's interpretation of **"Hamlet,"** at St. Ann's Warehouse, Feb. 1-March 8, Negga makes her New York stage debut—and how can her performance be less than interesting? She's lived in the play a long time. In 2010, in London, Negga played Ophelia, she who loves Hamlet not for who he might be but for who he is.—*Hilton Als*

just fine as a specimen of her style. Bill (James Cromwell) and Nancy (Jane Alexander) are senior citizens tucked away in a gated community, yet muster the energy to divorce. Their sons, Ben (Ben McKenzie) and Brian (Michael Urie), descend on the house in a confused fury—is the split the result of somebody's oncoming dementia? The play, directed by Leigh Silverman for Second Stage, is a comic machine: there's a laugh a minute, and the actors, especially Alexander and Urie, milk quiet moments for a few more. But the best bit of the show is one that's purely theatrical—something goes boom. The satisfaction of that set piece yields another realization: it's the only thing Wohl offers that wouldn't translate just as well on a screen.—*Vinson Cunningham (Through March 1.)*

My Name Is Lucy Barton

Samuel J. Friedman

Laura Linney stars in a one-woman adaptation of Elizabeth Strout's 2016 novel (directed by Richard Eyre, for the Manhattan Theatre Club), about a woman from Amgash, Illinois,

who escapes her poor upbringing to become a writer in New York. Lucy tells the audience that years ago, while in the hospital with a mysterious illness, she woke to find her estranged mother in her room, part comfort, part threat. Together, they tell tales of Amgash, circling the traumas of Lucy's childhood—caused by the cruelties of Lucy's mother and father, who had post-traumatic stress disorder from serving in the Second World War. Strout's language, deftly adapted for the stage by Rona Munro, is elegantly simple, and Linney, radiating warmth and lucidity, is just the right actor to bring it to life—her ninety-minute performance is a feat of subtle bravura. But this production could use more life—an escape from the antiseptic cloister of the hospital room to the rousing world outside.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 1/27/20.) (Through Feb. 29.)*

Paradise Lost

Theatre Row

This take on John Milton's epic about the fall of man, written by Tom Dulack and produced

by the Christian-missioned Fellowship for Performing Arts, begins with darkness, the clamor of war, and, when the lights come up, the fallen angel Lucifer (David Andrew Macdonald)—head bowed, regal but defeated—standing center stage, singed and battered amid smoke and flames. It's a thrillingly cinematic beginning, but character and drama are elsewhere scarce, as this **"Paradise Lost"** lacks the majesty of Milton and the imagination to draw something novel from the Biblical story. Lucifer, who leads a failed rebellion against Heaven, is missing the charisma he's owed, and his tempting of the curious and desirous Eve (Marina Shay) and the simple, obedient Adam (Robbie Simpson) in the Garden of Eden is regrettably colorless. Flat dialogue and stiff performances are peppered with incidental anachronisms (one character zips by on a scooter); Michael Parva's direction, like the script, foregrounds pedagogy over discovery.—*Maya Phillips (Through Feb. 23.)*

Romeo & Bernadette

A.R.T./New York Theatres

Poor Romeo: not only is this blank-verse-spouting gentle soul desperately in love with the daughter of an enemy family but her father is a mafioso. And the foulmouthed wench's name isn't even Juliet but Bernadette. In this new musical, the book writer Mark Saltzman wisely doesn't spend much time explaining how a Shakespearean protagonist ends up in 1960 Brooklyn, which leaves more room for an avalanche of broad gangland gags. For the songs, Saltzman set new lyrics to Italian melodies borrowed from sources operatic (Rossini, Bellini) and popular (Enrico Cannio, Francesco Paolo Tosti). (Steve Orich did the inventive arrangements.) Directed on a shoestring, by Justin Ross Cohen for Amas Musical Theatre, the production mixes two familiar genres—the fish out of water and the mafia comedy—with entirely predictable results. Notable in the cast is the **"Mamma Mia!"** veteran Judy McLane, whose comic edge remains sharp.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Feb. 16.)*

17 Minutes

TBG Theatre

In the aftermath of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida, few people spared much empathy for a police deputy nicknamed the Coward of Broward for his failure to enter the school during the massacre. In this play, presented by the Barrow Group—which, without mentioning Parkland, reads like a fictionalized version of that incident—the playwright Scott Organ offers a nuanced argument in the officer's defense. The complexity comes mostly via outstanding performances in strong, small roles: Brian Rojas as the detective who interrogates the deputy; Shannon Patterson as a school cop who's been hailed as the hero of the tragedy; Michael Giese as the shooter's father; and, especially, Lee Brock as a victim's mother. Larry Mitchell's lead performance is comparatively limp; neither Organ nor the director, Seth Barrish, seems to have convincingly imagined the deputy's state

of mind, and the character comes across as dopey and peevish.—*R.R. (Through Feb. 15.)*

ART

Michael Rakowitz Lombard

CHELSEA This Iraqi-American artist is known for his newsworthy gestures of conscience—he was the first to withdraw from last year’s Whitney Biennial in an ultimately successful campaign to pressure Warren B. Kanders, whose company sells tear gas, to resign from the museum’s board. (More recently, Rakowitz has asked that his video in MOMA PS1’s exhibition about the Gulf Wars be paused, to protest the investments of several of MOMA’s trustees.) This timely show, which opened just after Trump threatened to destroy Iranian cultural sites, continues Rakowitz’s long-standing project re-creating artifacts that have been looted or destroyed since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. His materials are bright scraps of Middle Eastern packaging. Deceptively festive, these collaged reproductions of reliefs from the ninth-century B.C. Assyrian Northwest Palace of Nimrud—subjected to piecemeal colonial excavation, and then demolished by ISIS, in 2015—appear as freestanding panels arranged in their original configuration. Although a heartrending label describes its fate, a large composition of a bird-headed sage on a background of vibrant pink, framed by flowers and trees, is nonetheless uplifting.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Feb. 22.)*

Janet Sobel and Pearl Blauvelt Edlin

DOWNTOWN These figurative artists—both born in 1893 and self-taught—fascinate in very different ways. Sobel, a Ukrainian immigrant and Brighton Beach housewife, took up painting at the age of forty-five and became a sensation of the postwar avant-garde: her vivacious tangles of dripped paint predate those of Jackson Pollock by several years and were an acknowledged influence. In the dense compositions here, from the nineteen-forties, faces float above busy areas marbled with streaming color or blanketed with wildflowers. Blauvelt’s drawings, which went unnoticed until after her death, in 1987, have a strangely storybook quality, faithful to their own rules of proportion and perspective. The colored-pencil drawings in this exhibition favor characters in the countryside; in one dynamic example, a hunter, his dog, and a flying turkey are all depicted as being the same size. Sobel died in 1968, forgotten, but she was briefly at the heart of the New York art scene; not too far away, in northeastern Pennsylvania, Blauvelt spent a quiet life, observing from the sidelines.—*J.F. (Through Feb. 22.)*

Issy Wood JTT

DOWNTOWN Paint becomes a kind of embalming fluid in the hands of this talented young

artist, who memorializes objects—antique keys, vintage dolls, a ceramic swan—that suggest rummage-sale finds. The idiosyncratic works on linen, velvet, and clothing include a small diptych titled “Barbra discovers she’s married,” from 2018, in which a young Streisand appears twice in profile: first, in tight closeup, impassively inspecting a diamond ring on her manicured finger, and, again, in another cropped view that includes a glimpse of her elaborate hair style. In Wood’s rendering, the image recalls a photograph discolored with age, in keeping with the just-out-of-focus feel of the rest of her show. The mood isn’t melancholic, or even nostalgic, exactly—but there is no doubt that it’s eccentric. Wood can also be

funny, as a still-life of plastic grapes and a plaster cast of teeth sporting metal braces attests.—*J.F. (Through Feb. 9.)*

MOVIES

The Assistant

The mood is heavy with anxiety and foreboding at the Tribeca offices of a film-production company, where a young woman named Jane (Julia Garner), a recent college graduate, puts in extreme hours as an assistant to the boss, a man (whose face is never shown). He turns out to be a serial sexual

ON THE STREETS



The young Emirati photographer **Farah Al Qasimi** is best known for her pictures of life in the Persian Gulf. These balancing acts of pattern, color, and texture—and of humor and melancholy—subtly critique Orientalist stereotypes while celebrating the alloy of comfort and strangeness that a visit home can unearth. In her new project for the Public Art Fund—seventeen images installed on a hundred bus shelters citywide, opening on Jan. 29—Qasimi turns a lens on her other home, New York City, where she moved, in 2018, after earning her M.F.A. at Yale. Like its title, “Back and Forth Disco,” the series puts a jubilant spin on the complications of bridging two cultures, the way so many New Yorkers do. Whether Qasimi discovers a crystal chandelier in a Yemeni-owned bodega, a cockatoo in a curtain emporium, or the eclectic inventory of a dollar store (above), she springs an eye-catching surprise, a reminder that every here is also an elsewhere.—*Andrea K. Scott*

predator, luring young women with offers of employment. What's more, Jane's colleagues know what's going on and enable his misdeeds—and crimes. This drama, written and directed by Kitty Green, is a diagnostic view of a reign of terror. The manipulative boss berates Jane over trivialities and then flatters her; his employees—mostly men, slick or nerdy—condescendingly keep her in line. The agonizing tale combines personal and structural misogyny, gaslighting, emotional assault, and the corruption of workplace relations; Green's direction and dramatic sensibility are blunt, but the film's laboratory-like microcosm of scenarios pointedly similar to recent widely publicized events in the movie business is shocking and effective. With Matthew Macfadyen as a human-resources executive from Hell.—*Richard Brody* (*In limited release.*)

Beanpole

The agonies of history return with a calculated vengeance in Kantemir Balagov's first feature. It's set in Leningrad, just after the end of the Second World War, and its title character is a tall young woman named Iya

(Viktoria Miroshnichenko), a nurse at a military hospital who's enduring the aftereffects of a concussion suffered in combat. She's taking care of a baby for her friend Masha (Vasilisa Perelygina), who's recovering from wounds that prevent her from conceiving again. When the toddler dies in Iya's care, Masha demands that Iya bear a child for her. Balagov packs the plot with crises—unbearable injury, mental trauma, hopeless romance, political privilege, blackmail—and films amorphous theatrical tableaux that spotlight showy performances and photogenic moments. But the characters don't seem to exist outside the stilted drama of their individual scenes; the ambiguities of Balagov's detached approach yield a sentimental tale of pride and reverence. Meanwhile, he doesn't miss a chance to undress his actresses—principals and extras alike—for the camera. In Russian.—*R.B.* (*In limited release.*)

Judy

Renée Zellweger's passionate and vulnerable incarnation of Judy Garland energizes this empathetic, nuanced, yet patchy drama centered on the singer's London concert

series in 1968, the year before her death. Struggling with her career because of a prescription-drug addiction that dates back to her childhood stardom, Garland desperately seeks custody of her children, Lorna and Joey Luft, but is penniless and homeless. She only accepts the London gig to earn enough money to support them. Although she flings herself devotedly into the concerts, her initial triumphs crumble in the face of fresh troubles, including an unhappy new marriage and failed business plans. Flashbacks to her teen-age years at M-G-M reveal the abusive studio regime that brought her worldwide fame at the expense of her private life. Tom Edge's script, based on a play by Peter Quilter, lapses into clichés, but the dialogue is often sharp, and Zellweger offers it up with flair and fury. She also sings, and, though her voice hardly resembles Garland's, she commands the stage majestically. Directed by Rupert Goold.—*R.B.* (*Streaming.*)

Melinda

Hugh A. Robertson's first feature, from 1972, offers a sly and seething blend of genres and tones in the guise of a straightforward blaxploitation drama. Frankie J. Parker (Calvin Lockhart), a suave, hip d.j. and Los Angeles man-about-town, meets the elegant Melinda (Vonetta McGee) in a night club; their rapturous affair ends two days later—when he comes home from work and finds her murdered in his apartment. Wrongly arrested, Frankie is quickly released from police custody but is soon targeted by a gangland associate, and discovers that the killing was an ordered hit—and that he's a pawn in a far-reaching conspiracy involving the media, drug dealers, and union politics. With intrepid planning, martial artistry, and unhinged violence—and thanks to the audacious complicity of his longtime lover, Terry (Rosalind Cash)—Frankie fights back. This Hitchcockian setup gives rise to rapturous romance, crude comedy, and frenzied action; Robertson sets the hectic melodrama in swift motion with a brash sense of style.—*R.B.* (*MOMA, Jan. 29, and streaming.*)

The Traitor

If you want family values, Marco Bellocchio is your man, though they may not be what you expect. His coruscating debut, "Fists in the Pocket" (1965), showed a household ripped apart by mental illness and matricide. In his latest film, more than half a century on, it's the ties of clan loyalty, among criminal patriarchs and their loved ones, that are strained and torn. For an epic plot, Bellocchio turns to recent history: the tale of Tommaso Buscetta (Pierfrancesco Favino), a Mafia boss who dares to testify against his fellow-crooks. The settings range from Sicily to Brazil and America (where Buscetta lives for a while under the witness-protection program) and, likewise, the tone sways between the murderous and the surreally comic—the highlight being the notorious Maxi Trial, starting in 1986, in which rows of caged mafiosi fling curses across the courtroom. In Italian and related dialects.—*Anthony Lane* (*In wide release.*)

IN REVIVAL



Jim Jarmusch revealed an original and influential cinematic world view in his second feature, "**Stranger Than Paradise**," from 1984 (screening on Jan. 31 in MOMA's series "American Indies, 1980-1989"). It's a whimsically dour tale of a young Hungarian woman named Eva (Eszter Balint) who comes to New York and connects with a pair of grubby gamblers—her cousin Willie (John Lurie) and his pal Eddie (Richard Edson)—en route to visit her elderly aunt (Cecillia Stark) in Cleveland. The comedic chaos of their lives gives rise to a threadbare road movie; their workaday worries mesh with innocent, angelic fantasy. Jarmusch lets time run free in stylized and static long takes that blend his characters' Beckettian inertia with the quasi-documentary fascination of the idiosyncratic performers just being there. He links the kitsch of down-market culture—shabby motels and thrift-shop clothing, TV dinners and TV shows—to vintage musical treasures (embodied in Eva's cassette of Screamin' Jay Hawkins) in a unified vision of populist American aesthetics.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

HK Food Court

82-02 45th Ave., Queens

About a year ago, I moved from one Brooklyn neighborhood to another. After several recent trips to the new Elmhurst outpost of HK Food Court (the original is in Flushing), I've been wondering if I shouldn't have relocated to Queens instead. Of course, there are considerations other than eating when deciding where to live, but, at the moment, my difficulty getting there leaves me feeling a little sorry for myself.

Once you've arrived, HK Food Court is an emblem of ease, a fast and comfortable one-stop shop for fulfilling a variety of cravings. A couple of dozen stalls—serving regional Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Filipino cuisine—line the perimeter of a windowless but brightly lit box that used to house a pan-Asian grocery store; in the center is cafeteria-style seating for about two hundred, livened up with potted plants.

My most pressing craving is for the hot-and-sour soup from Lao Ma Spicy. The vender specializes in dry pot (like hot pot but brothless, and cooked to order), which is worth having, too.

But the soup is what haunts my daydreams: a large disposable plastic bowl priced irresistibly, at \$4.99, and packed precariously full of glass noodles in an intensely flavorful broth—indeed hot, both in temperature and flavor, scarlet with chili oil, and vinegar-sour. For a few dollars extra, you can add a protein: beef, shrimp balls, Spam. Either way, the final and most crucial ingredients are dry-roasted peanuts with their papery brown skins intact, sweet leaves of steamed bok choy, and an intoxicating spoonful of ground pork, sautéed with tender curls of wood-ear mushroom and pickled radish.

Skewers, too, go twirling through my mind. One evening, at Lan Zhou Ramen, I ordered fat coins of Japanese eggplant—so shellacked in oil that they looked like porcelain yet melted forgivingly in the mouth—and bunches of chives as pliant as seagrass. From Mr. Liu Henan Wide Ramen, one stall over: cubes of fried wheat-bran dough dusted in cumin and a spiral-cut potato.

To say that the tables are communal is an understatement. That evening, a stranger darted over to point at the potato, wanting to know where he could find it. (He was gone before I could tell him that it wasn't quite as good as it looked.) One afternoon, a woman sipped milky tea and took bites from a flaky orange-hued pastry, exposing a dark mash within. My friend inquired as to what it was and where she got it. The dough was made with pumpkin, she explained, the filling sweet black-bean paste—and she had brought it from home. She dug

into a plastic bag for another, insisting that we take it.

I knew what to get at Khao Ka Moo, because I saw many people hunched over the same dish, and, plus, the stall is named for it: *khao ka moo*, otherwise known as stewed pork leg over rice, garnished with a hard-boiled egg and pickled mustard greens and served with a cup of clear pork broth.

I knew what to get at a seafood stall called Chili Boiled Fish, where live ones flopped around in a tank. A friendly cashier with a tattoo on her neck of a lipstick kiss carefully sealed a patterned bowl (for which I paid a five-dollar deposit) with plastic wrap to insure that it stayed hot. That proved unnecessary; it was many minutes before the dish cooled to less than scalding—which didn't stop me from immediately plunging my flimsy spoon into the oily depths to find silky fillets of fish, tender cabbage, and chunks of cucumber, Sichuan peppercorns clinging to all, staining my rice with neon drips.

At Famous Food, three women pinched dough around minced meat and piled Styrofoam plates with slippery steamed dumplings: pork, shrimp, and chive; pork and celery; wontons swimming in chili oil, topped with clumps of sharp raw garlic. In a moment of respite, the women snacked on half-peeled sweet potatoes, holding their leathery skins like ice-cream cones. "Can I order one of those?" I wondered aloud. They shook their heads and laughed. (Dishes \$2–\$35.)

—Hannah Goldfield



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT IMBALANCE OF POWER

In the dazed aftermath of the 2016 election, as a vast portion of the country tried to come to terms with the fact that a fixture of the tabloids and of reality TV would be the next President of the United States, Stephen Bannon, one of Donald Trump's senior advisers, sought to place the event in a historical context. Like Andrew Jackson, Bannon told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "We're going to build an entirely new political movement." Trump, embracing the comparison, hung a portrait of Jackson in the Oval Office. Superficially, the kinship made sense: both Jackson and Trump were wealthy men whose elections signified a populist turn in American politics. Both were ridiculed as uncouth and déclassé, and both saw their colorful marital history dissected in the newspapers. A deeper comparison would also have highlighted the racism associated with their political careers: Jackson owned slaves and directed the removal of Native Americans from their lands; Trump campaigned on a platform of removing people from the nation itself.

President Trump's impeachment trial in the Senate points to another, potentially far more consequential area of commonality between the two Presidents. In 1832, the Supreme Court handed down a decision, in *Worcester v. Georgia*, that effectively prohibited the states from usurping Native Americans' sovereignty over their lands. That conflicted with Jackson's plans, and he responded by saying, in effect, good luck with enforcing that. Jackson's critics saw such willing-

ness to dismiss the authority of a co-equal branch of the government as further evidence that he had no business being in the Oval Office.

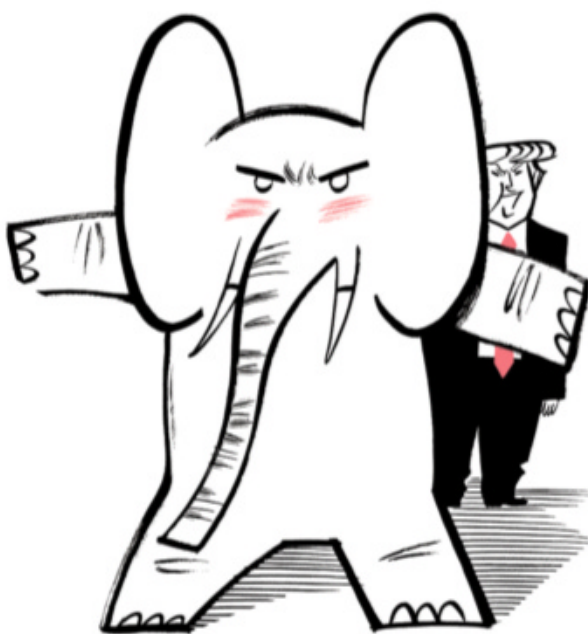
The Trump Administration's strategy for fighting impeachment entails dismissing the authority of the third co-equal branch of government. The White House has steadfastly ignored the House of Representatives' subpoenas to produce documents and witnesses relating to Trump's alleged attempt to strong-arm the Ukrainian government to assist with a ploy to sink Joe Biden's Presidential candidacy. It is not unheard-of for an Administration to stall or only partly comply with subpoenas. (The Republican-led House notably held Attorney General Eric Holder in contempt, in 2012, for not fully complying with subpoenas related to the Department of Justice's Fast and Furious firearms sting operation.) But Trump has refused to comply at all, and congressional Republicans, ignoring one of

their most important duties—executive oversight—have abetted his position.

At the start of trial, in eleven roll-call votes, the Republican majority voted down measures to request relevant documents or to hear from new witnesses regarding the Ukraine scheme. Representative Hakeem Jeffries, one of the House impeachment managers, gave an impassioned speech stating the case for summoning Mick Mulvaney, the acting White House chief of staff, to testify. He also told Jay Sekulow, one of Trump's attorneys, who had questioned why the trial was even taking place, "We are here, sir, because President Trump pressured a foreign government to target an American citizen for political and personal gain." He concluded by quoting a fellow-Brooklynite, the Notorious B.I.G.: "If you don't know, now you know." Biggie notwithstanding, the speech failed to move the Republican caucus.

The votes left open the possibility that witnesses and documents might become available, but only later in the proceedings—a state of affairs that Representative Adam Schiff, the lead House manager, called "ass-backwards." The significance of the votes is twofold: not only did Senate Republicans co-sign the White House's effort to turn the impeachment into a show trial; they reduced the power of the legislative branch to which they themselves belong.

In recent years, short-term thinking has come to define our politics to an alarming degree. In 2016, when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell blocked President Barack Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court without so much as a vote,



he seemed not to consider what might happen the next time a Republican President tried to shepherd a nominee through a Democratic Senate. The G.O.P. that has come to support Trump's inflammatory nativism is failing to consider the demographic dead end it faces in alienating rapidly growing numbers of immigrant and minority voters. These decisions were bad for the Party and for judicial integrity. The Republican response to the impeachment is bad for the future of democracy.

It's not difficult to discern what some of the long-term impacts of this short-term thinking may be. Trump's coercive phone conversation with the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, occurred after Attorney General William Barr had miscast the Mueller report as an exonerating of the Trump Administration's alleged contacts with Russians trying to interfere in the 2016 election. Even after the whistle-blower's account of the

Ukraine call emerged, Rudy Giuliani, Trump's unofficial envoy, travelled to that country on his behalf. And, even in the midst of the trial, Trump continues to push a false conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the last election. An acquittal in the Senate would confirm Trump's dangerous idea of an omnipotent Presidency.

In explaining why power was to be disseminated among the three branches of government, Madison wrote, in *Federalist No. 51*, that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Thus far, the Senate majority's stance on impeachment can more aptly be described as ambition emboldened by deference. Schiff underscored this problem last week, when he told the senators, "You know you can't trust this President to do what's right for this country. You can trust he will do what's right for Donald Trump. He'll do it now. He's done it before. He'll do it for the next several

months. He'll do it in the election if he's allowed to." An acquittal would set a precedent for a U.S. President to invite foreign intervention in one election, demand it in a subsequent election, and remain in power nonetheless. Earlier this month, it was reported that Russian military hackers had attacked Burisma, the Ukrainian gas company that is at the center of the impeachment debacle. It's reasonable to suspect that they may have been looking for information that could be helpful to Trump's reelection effort.

There is a contrast that Bannon could not have envisioned four years ago. Jackson's reputation was made when, as a general, he defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans, in the War of 1812. He was revered for his willingness to protect the nation from hostile foreign powers. No such claim can be made for Trump. His Presidency has rendered the country more susceptible to them.

—Jelani Cobb

DEPT. OF HOBBIES LITTLE DRUMMER BOY



When assembling the legal team for his Senate impeachment trial, President Trump called up some old friends: Alan Dershowitz, a lawyer for the late Jeffrey Epstein and the author of "The Case Against Impeaching Trump"; Ken Starr, whom, during Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, Trump referred to as a "lunatic"; and two lawyers who defended the President during the Russia probe, Jane Raskin and Jay Sekulow. "We've got the band back together!" Raskin said to CNN, before the hearings began last week. "Jay is definitely the leader of the band."

It's a familiar role for Sekulow, who, for the past several years, has played drums and rhythm guitar in his own rock group, the Jay Sekulow Band. The Jay Sekulow Band often performs on "Jay Sekulow Live!," a daily syndicated radio show hosted by Jay Sekulow and his son Jordan Sekulow. The group does dad-band covers of classic-rock tunes, and some Christian-tinged originals. Their

version of the Doobie Brothers' "Jesus Is Just Alright" has more than a million views on Facebook. Their original song "Where I Stand" ("Father in Heaven hear our prayer/ Strengthen your souls lost in despair") has fewer. The comments section of the band's Facebook page is a mishmash of true and false: one fan thought that Sekulow was a congressman; another identified him as a born-again Christian and the chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice. Another wrote, "Congas need to be up in the mix more but otherwise you guys sound great."

The Jay Sekulow Band specializes in the timely posting of songs that function as commentaries on the news. In October, after the story of Trump's Ukraine phone call broke, Sekulow posted a video of his band performing the R. & B. classic "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." The video opens with a shot of the Capitol, followed by clips of Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff talking impeachment, and one of Lindsey Graham complaining that the whole thing is based on hearsay. Cut to the Jay Sekulow Band in its studio (guitars hanging on the walls, Oriental rugs). Sekulow pounds away on the drums in a black T-shirt, his dark hair perfect, separated from the other band members by a glass drum shield. And in

2016, right after Trump tweeted that Hillary Clinton was a "PATHOLOGICAL LIAR" for phumphering about her use of a private e-mail server, Sekulow posted the band playing the Three Dog Night hit "Liar." (Debbie Landers, a fan who is a retired nurse in St. Louis, said, "I do like how he can find a song that matches the kind of folks that he and we as a nation deal with.") The whole band wails on the chorus—"Li-ar!"—with Sekulow crashing the cymbals each time. Visible on his wrist, during closeups, is a Beat-



Jay Sekulow

les edition Raymond Weil watch that has song titles where the numbers should be.

Like Trump's legal team, Sekulow's band was conceived as a sort of supergroup, a C-list Traveling Wilburys. To glam up his legal-pad demeanor, Sekulow recruited several stars from the Christian-rock scene: John Elefante, of the band Kansas (a recent hit: "Pass the Flame"); John Schlitt ("God Is Too Big"), of Head East; and Mark Lee Townsend, of DC Talk, which is a regular on the Jesus Freak Cruise.

"Jay's lineup of superstars is outstanding," Scott Cameron, a fan in California, said over the phone. "I don't know how he brought those guys into the fold. You'd think these guys would be drugged-up rock stars from the seventies who are long gone, but no!" Cameron likes to watch the band's live performances on its Facebook page. "When you see Jay on the drums, he seems very staid," Cameron said.

Vance Jorgensen, a personal-injury lawyer in Iowa and Minnesota who found the band through his love of Head East, said that he has managed to separate the Jay Sekulow Band from its politics. He just likes the songs. "I respect Jay for what he's put together," Jorgensen said. "He's bringing in the actual guys who were doing concert tours back in the late sixties, early seventies. Perhaps as time goes on he'll get a little more comfortable, step out front, do a little singing. Who knows?"

Sekulow did not appear too comfortable in his first week leading Trump's defense in the impeachment trial. He was ridiculed for mischaracterizing the conclusions of the Mueller report and for garbling the articles of impeachment themselves, and he rambled on disjointedly after mishearing a remark by the opposing counsel. "Trump may have hired America's dumbest lawyer in Jay Sekulow," Jonathan Chait wrote, in *New York*. And Chief Justice John Roberts, who is known to be a Bob Dylan man, admonished both legal teams for their childish behavior.

The Jay Sekulow Band is on hiatus during the impeachment trial, but perhaps Cameron, the fan in California, has the right take: "You see Jay in the background, playing the drums, and he loves it to death—but he knows his place back there. He's no Neil Peart."

—Tyler Foggatt

HOLLYWOOD POSTCARD BIG FISH



Five days before Hillary Clinton made headlines last week for dissing Bernie Sanders ("Nobody likes him, nobody wants to work with him," she says in a forthcoming documentary), she went to a Hollywood dinner for a nonprofit whose aim is to "make space for women to be heard." Thirty-four attendees waited eagerly for Clinton in a house belonging to Bozoma Saint John, the chief marketing officer of the talent company En-



Hillary Clinton and Patricia Arquette

deavor, to talk about Vital Voices, the women's-empowerment organization that Clinton helped start in 1997.

Patricia Arquette studied a plaque on Saint John's desk. "Feminist AF!" she read aloud. "That's so good." The previous week, she had urged her Twitter followers not to count Sanders out. (Arquette had no comment on Clinton's Bernie bashing.) Sally Field, in polka dots, admired a framed definition of the word "boss." Arquette eyed the front door, which had just opened. "Oh no," she moaned. "A male."

"Am I, really?" the new arrival asked. It was her brother, David Arquette. The siblings got involved with Vital Voices through David's wife, Christina, whose uncle, Mack McLarty, was Bill Clinton's

first chief of staff. David is often dragged onstage at the organization's events. "I always go up and say, 'I'm sorry, on behalf of men,'" he said.

Alyse Nelson, the C.E.O. of Vital Voices, explained the group's goals. "Our work is very much behind the scenes," she said. She noted that the organization had raised more than six hundred thousand dollars for Malala Yousafzai's education fund but had kept it under wraps. Now they were looking to take some credit. "We are realizing that if we don't tell our own story, we can't scale," Nelson said. "We're better known in India than we are in Indiana."

The guest of honor arrived, and everyone gathered for a photo. A woman shouted, "Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth so that you don't have a double chin!" As the camera flashed, Field yelled, "We have more important things to worry about!" Guests were seated at two long, candlelit tables, and Nelson invited Clinton to sit beside her and explain Vital Voices' genesis. Clinton chose to stand.

"Well, now *I* have to stand," Nelson grumbled. "Even though I have four-inch heels on."

"That was your choice," Clinton said amiably. She wore a houndstooth jacket and sensible shoes.

The two recapped some of the group's greatest hits—protecting Russian journalists, assisting a Cameroonian woman running for office. They announced a Vital Voices headquarters, which will open next year, blocks from the White House. A board member ticked off bleak statistics from the International Monetary Fund. "Only two per cent of C.E.O.s in the financial sector are women," she said. "It feels like we had a moment," after the financial crisis, "but we haven't made very much progress. Do you think we should be feeling optimistic?"

"I do!" Clinton said. She turned to T. D. Jakes, a pastor, for a pep talk. "Bishop Jakes, can you give a short version of the cod and the catfish?"

The short version: in a time before Whole Foods, residents of the East Coast ate a lot of cod. "Much like salmon is popular today," Jakes said. The West Coast wanted in, so cod was put on trains west. "It didn't taste the same," Jakes said. "So they decided to ship it alive, in aquariums. It still didn't have the right consistency or taste." Then they tried

putting some catfish in the tanks, because catfish and cod are natural enemies. When the cod arrived out West, it was fresh. “Somewhere, in every person’s life who’s successful, there’s a catfish they’re chasing,” Jakes concluded.

“Remember that being chased by these catfish, *whoever* they are, should keep us fresh and energized and focussed,” Clinton said. “There’s a real danger right now, because it’s so easy to get discouraged, depressed—to retreat. But that just lets the catfish take over.”

“I have an idea,” the TV host Maria Menounos said. “What if we identify those young Hollywood leaders who, yes, want to be an actress or a musician but also have this crazy passion for social change and don’t know how to do it?”

Field shook her head. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but Hollywood is just so fickle and jaded.”

“Oh, *Sally*,” David Arquette said.

“It’s true!” Field said. “I’ve tried to have fund-raising events in Hollywood, and nobody shows up.”

Talk turned to Vital Voices’ P.R. “It’s nebulous,” Patricia Arquette said. “The story tells the story. Look at Greta. I want to *see* the lady in Cameroon.”

“A great way to get these stories out is to marry Vital Voices with female filmmakers,” Alyssa Milano said. “You can submit them to Sundance.” (The Clinton documentary, “Hillary,” in which she berates a catfish named Bernie, will premiere there this week.)

“You can probably work out a deal with a film festival,” Menounos said. She had a better idea: “Get a deal at Netflix.”

—Sheila Marikar

THE BOARDS MARITAL JUJITSU



Christopher Sieber and Jennifer Simard met twenty-five years ago and complete each other’s sentences in the teasing manner of a married couple. But they’re not married; they’re stage actors, who have costarred in “Shrek the Musical” (Sieber was Lord Farquaad; Simard was the Wicked Witch) and “Annie” (he was Daddy Warbucks; she was Miss Han-

nigan). This spring, in a new Broadway revival of “Company,” the 1970 musical by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth, they will play a married couple named Harry and Sarah—one of five pairs who revolve around the protagonist, a marriage-phobic bachelor named Bobby, who, in the new production, is a marriage-phobic bachelorette named Bobbie.

The revival, which originated in London, has also updated some of the references for 2020. In the original, Sarah is taking a karate class and demonstrates her moves on Harry. In the new version, it’s jujitsu, but she still knocks him to the floor. “I guess you could say we’re codependent,” Simard said of the characters, a few days before rehearsals. “You’re a recovering alcoholic—”

“—who’s still drinking,” Sieber said.

“And I’m an overeater—”

“—who’s still eating.”

The two were at Vitor Shaolin’s Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, a school in midtown, for a beginners’ class. (Barbara Barrie, who played Sarah in the original production, took karate lessons and made the director, Hal Prince, pay for them.) “My husband said, ‘You be careful. You haven’t been moving around lately,’” Sieber said with a laugh. Both actors are married. Sieber’s husband, Kevin Burrows, is the food stylist for “The Wendy Williams Show.” They met nineteen years ago, while acting on Broadway in “Beauty and the Beast.” (“He was the fork, and I was Gaston.”) Simard met her husband, the theatre electrician Brad Robertson, eighteen years ago, on the musical “I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change.” In “Company,” the martial-arts scene is interlaced with a song called “The Little Things You Do Together,” about the everyday minutiae that keep marriages healthy. Simard was partial to the line about “looks you misconstrue together.” “Brad and I call it the Disproportionate Response Game,” she said, and acted it out: “‘Honey, those vertical stripes look good!’ ‘Oh, because I look bad in the horizontal ones?’”

They filled out a questionnaire. “‘What would you like to achieve with our program?’” Simard read aloud, then wrote down, “Kick . . . Sieber’s . . . ass.” The school’s manager, Jen Sung, explained the philosophy of Brazilian jujitsu. “It really is a human game of chess,” she said. It was founded by Hélio Gracie, a petite man. “That’s why it’s made for

people who are smaller and can go against bigger people.”

“Perfect!” Simard said. (Sieber towers over her, which would make kicking his ass that much funnier onstage.)

Sung ran through the basics, including the tap, the jujitsu equivalent of crying uncle. “When I tap you, it says, ‘Hey, I know you could seriously hurt me, but I respect your technique enough that I’m going to submit to you.’ And the other person says, ‘I respect that, and I’m going to let you live.’” It seemed like a decent metaphor for marriage, in which knowing each other’s vulnerabilities breeds trust—or mutually assured destruction. “My husband and I are both black belts,” Sung added.

Sieber and Simard changed into blue uniforms, called *gis*, and began stretching. An instructor named Silvio taught them “how to fall” safely: curl into a ball, arms at your side. “Now you’re going to learn how to take somebody down,” he said, and demonstrated a double-leg maneuver, in which you clutch your opponent’s thighs and hook your legs around his knees. Then he showed them a move called “Americana from mount,” in which you wrench your opponent’s arm in an unholy direction until, presumably, you get the tap. Silvio invited Simard to try it on him, and she nervously twisted his elbow. “I’m very flexible,” he assured her.

Next came the rear naked choke, in which you cling to your opponent’s back like a backpack and strangle him with your forearm. Sieber and Simard each took an instructor, and soon the foursome was rolling on the floor. They moved on to self-defense, and the other instructor, Freddy, said, “Maybe we’re in Times Square, there’s a bar. You walk there after work, and some guys have had a rough day.” He showed how to block a punch, then slide in and lift one of those bad boys on your hip, like a fanny pack.

“So someone of my size, in theory, could do that to him?” Simard asked, nodding at Sieber.

“Yeah, because it’s all about the leverage,” Freddy said.

Last, they learned some basic grip defenses—how to pry off someone’s grabby fingers. Simard was giddy. “Forget music rehearsal. We’re doing this. *For hours*.” She added, “The choke hold I’m excited about.” It’s the little things.

—Michael Schulman

GAME FACE BOYS AND GIRLS

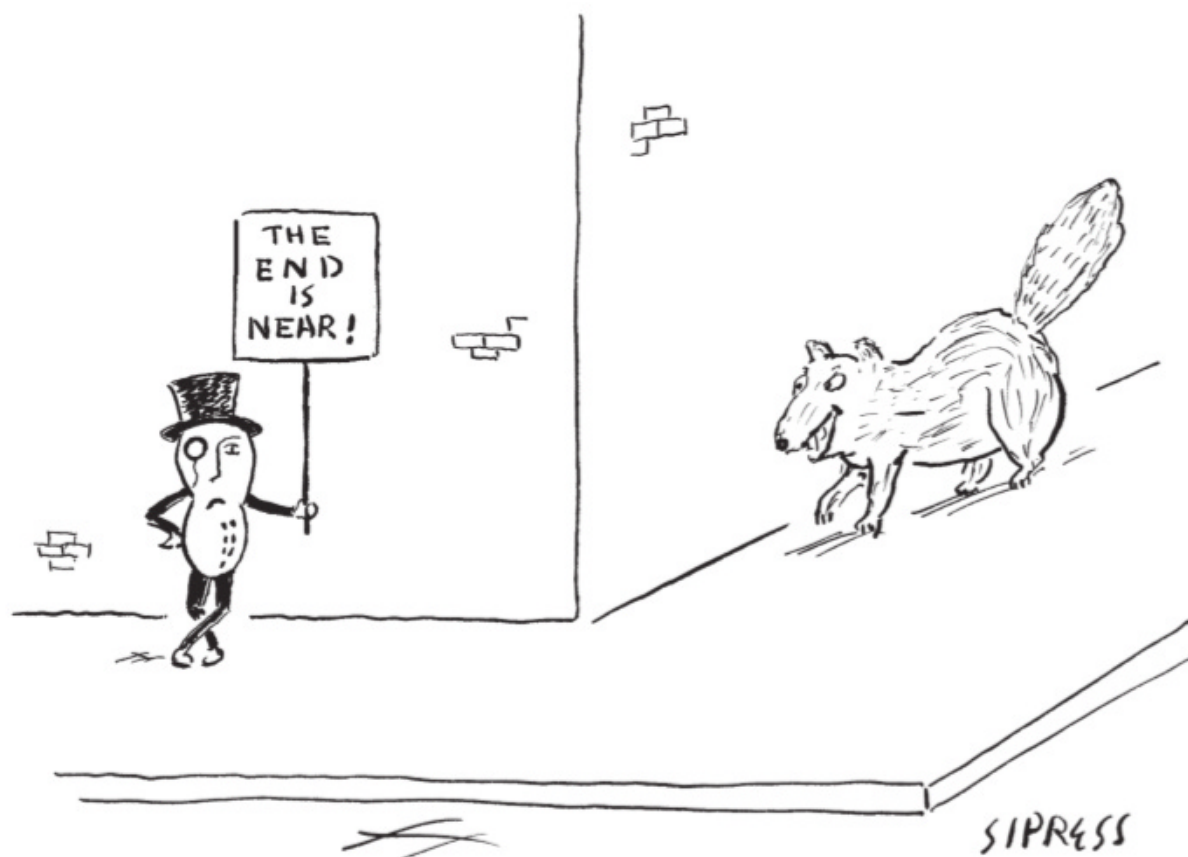


On Sunday, the San Francisco 49ers will face the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl LIV, in Miami. Recently, one state over, several dozen girls gathered at the John Lewis Invictus Academy, in Atlanta, for their own football game. The school was hosting the Jen Welter Girls' Flag Football Camp, a free workshop where kids would "ball out with some of the best," according to the camp's Web site. A tropical storm had relocated the balling to the gym, where about seventy girls and ten boys pulled on red T-shirts printed with the camp's team name, Grrridiron Girls, and logo: a line drawing of a football with long, pointy fingernails where the laces should be.

"I've been playing flag football for a year, just at the park or the schools around me," Ella White, a sixteen-year-old who'd come straight from ballet class, said. She smiled. "There's a lot of estrogen in here."

Shortly after 2 P.M., Jen Welter, dressed in black leggings, a black baseball cap, and a Grrridiron Girls shirt with the sleeves rolled up, addressed the campers. Her long brown hair had been pulled into a ponytail, and thick mascara coated her lashes. "We've got all kinds of battles trying to get girls and women an opportunity to play football," she said. "And we've got to fight natural disasters, too?"

Welter spent more than a decade as a linebacker in women's professional-football leagues before she suited up, in 2014, for a season as a running back with the Texas Revolution, a men's team in the Champions Indoor Football league (official stat line: one game, three carries, -1 yards). The following year, she became the first woman to land an N.F.L. coaching gig (a preseason internship with the Arizona Cardinals). But, when no full-time N.F.L. job materialized, she began teaching at youth camps across the country and discovered that even the coed ones were mostly male. "Nobody was specifically looking to give girls an opportunity to learn football,"



she said. In 2017, she started her camp.

First up, drills. The kids broke into groups and rotated through nine stations that had names like Flag Wars, Dictating Terms, and Around the World. Welter directed Read & React, a fast-moving defensive drill that required running forward, backward, or side to side depending on the command. Her coaching persona was like a cross between Bill Belichick—the gruff head coach of the New England Patriots—and Oprah.

"Pass!" Welter barked. "Run! Pass! Shuffle!"

"That was horrible for me," a girl with pigtails said.

"All of you on defense right now got beat. Why?" Welter asked. "You weren't ready."

"Nobody even noticed that I fell back there," a girl in pink-and-blue Fila sneakers complained.

"I'd love to tell you that you'll never fall down on a football field, but that's simply not the case," Welter said. "All we ask is that you get up and keep going."

Two hours later, the games began. Traffic cones split the gym floor into thirds, and in each section two teams of seven faced off. Although bodies constantly banged and players regularly landed with a loud thud on the hardwood floor, some girls wished for a little *more* contact. "I get put on my butt a lot," Rachel Wayne, the only girl on the Lanier High School varsity football

team, said. (She plays middle linebacker.) "But it's fun. My mom wants me to play in college, but there's part of me that's, like, 'I just want to be normal.'"

White, the ballerina, would like to play tackle. "But my mom won't let me," she said. "She's, like, 'Those concussions! I won't allow it!'"

At five-thirty, the final whistle blew. Everyone gathered for a sendoff from Welter. She talked about diversity and teamwork, and finally brought up the elephant in the room. "Someone asked me once why I'm O.K. with boys coming to girls' camp," she said. "Know why? Girls weren't allowed to play football when I was your age. We gotta be better than the generation before us."

As the crowd cleared out, two boys in Grrridiron Girls shirts stood waiting for their mothers. "It was a good experience because I learned that women don't have a lot of opportunities," an eleven-year-old named Calvin Paul, Jr., said.

"I don't mind playing with the girls," Kaden Mitchell, who is also eleven, said.

"Yeah," Paul said. "Because they have skills."

The feeling wasn't mutual. "When I play football at school, I usually go home because of an injury," Zoë Rolen, who is nine, said, referring to the roughness of the boys on her team. Did they accept her on the gridiron? She shrugged and said, "I don't care what they think."

—Tim Struby

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

IN EVERY DARK HOUR

In the thirties, democracy's survival was in question. What was our answer?

BY JILL LEPORE



The last time democracy nearly died all over the world and almost all at once, Americans argued about it, and then they tried to fix it. “The future of democracy is topic number one in the animated discussion going on all over America,” a contributor to the *New York Times* wrote in 1937. “In the Legislatures, over the radio, at the luncheon table, in the drawing rooms, at meetings of forums and in all kinds of groups of citizens everywhere, people are talking about the democratic way of life.” People bickered and people hollered, and they also made rules. “You are a liar!” one guy shouted from the audience during a political debate heard on the radio by ten

million Americans, from Missoula to Tallahassee. “Now, now, we don’t allow that,” the moderator said, calmly, and asked him to leave.

In the nineteen-thirties, you could count on the Yankees winning the World Series, dust storms plaguing the prairies, evangelicals preaching on the radio, Franklin Delano Roosevelt residing in the White House, people lining up for blocks to get scraps of food, and democracies dying, from the Andes to the Urals and the Alps.

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson’s Administration had promised that winning the Great War would “make the world safe for democracy.” The peace carved

nearly a dozen new states out of the former Russian, Ottoman, and Austrian empires. The number of democracies in the world rose; the spread of liberal-democratic governance began to appear inevitable. But this was no more than a reverie. Infant democracies grew, toddled, wobbled, and fell: Hungary, Albania, Poland, Lithuania, Yugoslavia. In older states, too, the desperate masses turned to authoritarianism. Benito Mussolini marched on Rome in 1922. It had taken a century and a half for European monarchs who ruled by divine right and brute force to be replaced by constitutional democracies and the rule of law. Now Fascism and Communism toppled these governments in a matter of months, even before the stock-market crash of 1929 and the misery that ensued.

“Epitaphs for democracy are the fashion of the day,” the soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote, dismally, in 1930. The *annus horribilis* that followed differed from every other year in the history of the world, according to the British historian Arnold Toynbee: “In 1931, men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of Society might break down and cease to work.” When Japan invaded Manchuria, the League of Nations condemned the annexation, to no avail. “The liberal state is destined to perish,” Mussolini predicted in 1932. “All the political experiments of our day are anti-liberal.” By 1933, the year Adolf Hitler came to power, the American political commentator Walter Lippmann was telling an audience of students at Berkeley that “the old relationships among the great masses of the people of the earth have disappeared.” What next? More epitaphs: Greece, Romania, Estonia, and Latvia. Authoritarians multiplied in Portugal, Uruguay, Spain. Japan invaded Shanghai. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. “The present century is the century of authority,” he declared, “a century of the Right, a Fascist century.”

American democracy, too, staggered, weakened by corruption, monopoly, apathy, inequality, political violence, hucksterism, racial injustice, unemployment, even starvation. “We do not distrust the future of essential democracy,” F.D.R.

It’s a paradox of democracy that the best way to defend it is to argue about it.

said in his first Inaugural Address, telling Americans that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself. But there *was* more to be afraid of, including Americans' own declining faith in self-government. "What Does Democracy Mean?" NBC radio asked listeners. "Do we Negroes believe in democracy?" W.E.B. Du Bois asked the readers of his newspaper column. Could it happen here? Sinclair Lewis asked in 1935. Americans suffered, and hungered, and wondered. The historian Charles Beard, in the inevitable essay on "The Future of Democracy in the United States," predicted that American democracy would endure, if only because "there is in America, no Rome, no Berlin to march on." Some Americans turned to Communism. Some turned to Fascism. And a lot of people, worried about whether American democracy could survive past the end of the decade, strove to save it.

"It's not too late," Jimmy Stewart pleaded with Congress, rasping, exhausted, in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," in 1939. "Great principles don't get lost once they come to light." It wasn't too late. It's still not too late.

There's a kind of likeness you see in family photographs, generation after generation. The same ears, the same funny nose. Sometimes now looks a lot like then. Still, it can be hard to tell whether the likeness is more than skin deep.

In the nineteen-nineties, with the end of the Cold War, democracies grew more plentiful, much as they had after the end of the First World War. As ever, the infant-mortality rate for democracies was high: baby democracies tend to die in their cradles. Starting in about 2005, the number of democracies around the world began to fall, as it had in the nineteen-thirties. Authoritarians rose to power: Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Donald J. Trump in the United States.

"American democracy," as a matter of history, is democracy with an asterisk, the symbol A-Rod's name would need if he were ever inducted into the Hall of Fame. Not until the 1964 Civil

Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act can the United States be said to have met the basic conditions for political equality requisite in a democracy. All the same, measured not against its past but against its contemporaries, American democracy in the twenty-first century is withering. The Democracy Index rates a hundred and sixty-seven countries, every year, on a scale that ranges from "full democracy" to "authoritarian regime." In 2006, the U.S. was a "full democracy," the seventeenth most democratic nation in the world. In 2016, the index for the first time rated the United States a "flawed democracy," and since then American democracy has gotten only more flawed. True, the United States still doesn't have a Rome or a Berlin to march on. That hasn't saved the nation from misinformation, tribalization, domestic terrorism, human-rights abuses, political intolerance, social-media mob rule, white nationalism, a criminal President, the nobbling of Congress, a corrupt Presidential Administration, assaults on the press, crippling polarization, the undermining of elections, and an epistemological chaos that is the only air that totalitarianism can breathe.

Nothing so sharpens one's appreciation for democracy as bearing witness to its demolition. Mussolini called Italy and Germany "the greatest and soundest democracies which exist in the world today," and Hitler liked to say that, with Nazi Germany, he had achieved a "beautiful democracy," prompting the American political columnist Dorothy Thompson to remark of the Fascist state, "If it is going to call itself democratic we had better find another word for what we have and what we want." In the nineteen-thirties, Americans didn't find another word. But they did work to decide what they wanted, and to imagine and to build it. Thompson, who had been a foreign correspondent in Germany and Austria and had interviewed the Führer, said, in a column that reached eight million readers, "Be sure you know what you prepare to defend."

It's a paradox of democracy that the best way to defend it is to attack it, to ask more of it, by way of criticism, protest, and dissent. American democracy in the nineteen-thirties had plenty of critics, left and right, from Mexican-

Americans who objected to a brutal regime of forced deportations to businessmen who believed the New Deal to be unconstitutional. W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that, unless the United States met its obligations to the dignity and equality of all its citizens and ended its enthrallment to corporations, American democracy would fail: "If it is going to use this power to force the world into color prejudice and race antagonism; if it is going to use it to manufacture millionaires, increase the rule of wealth, and break down democratic government everywhere; if it is going increasingly to stand for reaction, fascism, white supremacy and imperialism; if it is going to promote war and not peace; then America will go the way of the Roman Empire."

The historian Mary Ritter Beard warned that American democracy would make no headway against its "ruthless enemies—war, fascism, ignorance, poverty, scarcity, unemployment, sadistic criminality, racial persecution, man's lust for power and woman's miserable trailing in the shadow of his frightful ways"—unless Americans could imagine a future democracy in which women would no longer be barred from positions of leadership: "If we will not so envisage our future, no Bill of Rights, man's or woman's, is worth the paper on which it is printed."

If the United States hasn't gone the way of the Roman Empire and the Bill of Rights is still worth more than the paper on which it's printed, that's because so many people have been, ever since, fighting the fights Du Bois and Ritter Beard fought. There have been wins and losses. The fight goes on.

Could no system of rule but extremism hold back the chaos of economic decline? In the nineteen-thirties, people all over the world, liberals, hoped that the United States would be able to find a middle road, somewhere between the malignity of a state-run economy and the mercilessness of laissez-faire capitalism. Roosevelt campaigned in 1932 on the promise to rescue American democracy by way of a "new deal for the American people," his version of that third way: relief, recovery, and reform. He won forty-two of forty-eight states, and trounced the incumbent, Herbert Hoover, in the Electoral College 472 to 59. Given the national emergency

in which Roosevelt took office, Congress granted him an almost entirely free hand, even as critics raised concerns that the powers he assumed were barely short of dictatorial.

New Dealers were trying to save the economy; they ended up saving democracy. They built a new America; they told a new American story. On New Deal projects, people from different parts of the country labored side by side, constructing roads and bridges and dams, everything from the Lincoln Tunnel to the Hoover Dam, joining together in a common endeavor, shoulder to the wheel, hand to the forge. Many of those public-works projects, like better transportation and better electrification, also brought far-flung communities, down to the littlest town or the remotest farm, into a national culture, one enriched with new funds for the arts, theatre, music, and storytelling. With radio, more than with any other technology of communication, before or since, Americans gained a sense of their shared suffering, and shared ideals: they listened to one another's voices.

This didn't happen by accident. Writers and actors and directors and broadcasters made it happen. They dedicated themselves to using the medium to bring people together. Beginning in 1938, for instance, F.D.R.'s Works Progress Administration produced a twenty-six-week radio-drama series for CBS called

"Americans All, Immigrants All," written by Gilbert Seldes, the former editor of *The Dial*. "What brought people to this country from the four corners of the earth?" a pamphlet distributed to schoolteachers explaining the series asked. "What gifts did they bear? What were their problems? What problems remain unsolved?" The finale celebrated the American experiment: "The story of magnificent adventure! The record of an unparalleled event in the history of mankind!"

There is no twenty-first-century equivalent of Seldes's "Americans All, Immigrants All," because it is no longer acceptable for a serious artist to write in this vein, and for this audience, and for this purpose. (In some quarters, it was barely acceptable even then.) Love of the ordinary, affection for the common people, concern for the commonweal: these were features of the best writing and art of the nineteen-thirties. They are not so often features lately.

Americans reelected F.D.R. in 1936 by one of the widest margins in the country's history. American magazines continued the trend from the twenties, in which hardly a month went by without their taking stock: "Is Democracy Doomed?" "Can Democracy Survive?" (Those were the past century's versions of more recent titles, such as "How Democracy Ends," "Why Liberalism Failed," "How the Right Lost Its Mind,"

and "How Democracies Die." The same ears, that same funny nose.) In 1934, the *Christian Science Monitor* published a debate called "Whither Democracy?," addressed "to everyone who has been thinking about the future of democracy—and who hasn't." It staked, as adversaries, two British scholars: Alfred Zimmern, a historian from Oxford, on the right, and Harold Laski, a political theorist from the London School of Economics, on the left. "Dr. Zimmern says in effect that where democracy has failed it has not been really tried," the editors explained. "Professor Laski sees an irrepressible conflict between the idea of political equality in democracy and the fact of economic inequality in capitalism, and expects at least a temporary resort to Fascism or a capitalistic dictatorship." On the one hand, American democracy is safe; on the other hand, American democracy is not safe.

Zimmern and Laski went on speaking tours of the United States, part of a long parade of visiting professors brought here to prognosticate on the future of democracy. Laski spoke to a crowd three thousand strong, in Washington's Constitution Hall. "LASKI TELLS HOW TO SAVE DEMOCRACY," the *Washington Post* reported. Zimmern delivered a series of lectures titled "The Future of Democracy," at the University of Buffalo, in which he warned that democracy had been undermined by a new aristocracy of self-professed experts. "I am no more ready to be governed by experts than I am to be governed by the ex-Kaiser," he professed, expertly.

The year 1935 happened to mark the centennial of the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," an occasion that elicited still more lectures from European intellectuals coming to the United States to remark on its system of government and the character of its people, close on Tocqueville's heels. Heinrich Brüning, a scholar and a former Chancellor of Germany, lectured at Princeton on "The Crisis of Democracy"; the Swiss political theorist William Rappard gave the same title to a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago. In "The Prospects for Democracy," the Scottish historian and later BBC radio quiz-show panelist Denis W. Brogan offered little but gloom: "The defenders of



"What the hell was he thinking?"

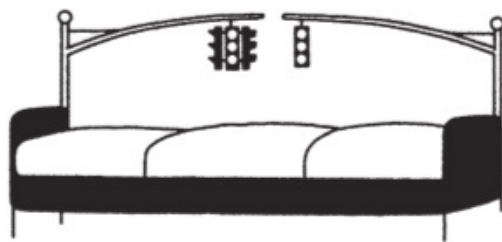
democracy, the thinkers and writers who still believe in its merits, are in danger of suffering the fate of Aristotle, who kept his eyes fixedly on the city-state at a time when that form of government was being reduced to a shadow by the rise of Alexander's world empire." Brogan hedged his bets by predicting the worst. It's an old trick.

The endless train of academics were also called upon to contribute to the nation's growing number of periodicals. In 1937, *The New Republic*, arguing that "at no time since the rise of political democracy have its tenets been so seriously challenged as they are today," ran a series on "The Future of Democracy," featuring pieces by the likes of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey. "Do you think that political democracy is now on the wane?" the editors asked each writer. The series' lead contributor, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, took issue with the question, as philosophers, thankfully, do. "I call this kind of question 'meteorological,'" he grumbled. "It is like asking, 'Do you think that it is going to rain today? Had I better take my umbrella?'" The trouble, Croce explained, is that political problems are not external forces beyond our control; they are forces within our control. "We need solely to make up our own minds and to act."

Don't ask whether you need an umbrella. Go outside and stop the rain.

Here are some of the sorts of people who went out and stopped the rain in the nineteen-thirties: schoolteachers, city councillors, librarians, poets, union organizers, artists, precinct workers, soldiers, civil-rights activists, and investigative reporters. They knew what they were prepared to defend and they defended it, even though they also knew that they risked attack from both the left and the right. Charles Beard (Mary Ritter's husband) spoke out against the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, the Rupert Murdoch of his day, when he smeared scholars and teachers as Communists. "The people who are doing the most damage to American democracy are men like Charles A. Beard," said a historian at Trinity College in Hartford, speaking at a high school on the subject of "Democracy and the Future," and warning against

reading Beard's books—at a time when Nazis in Germany and Austria were burning "un-German" books in public squares. That did not exactly happen here, but in the nineteen-thirties four of five American superintendents of schools recommended assigning only those U.S. history textbooks which "omit any facts likely to arouse in the minds of the students question or doubt concerning the justice of our social order



and government." Beard's books, God bless them, raised doubts.

Beard didn't back down. Nor did W.P.A. muralists and artists, who were subject to the same attack. Instead, Beard took pains to point out that Americans liked to think of themselves as good talkers and good arguers, people with a particular kind of smarts. Not necessarily book learning, but street smarts—reasonableness, open-mindedness, level-headedness. "The kind of universal intellectual prostration required by Bolshevism and Fascism is decidedly foreign to American 'intelligence,'" Beard wrote. Possibly, he allowed, you could call this a stubborn independence of mind, or even mulishness. "Whatever the interpretation, our wisdom or ignorance stands in the way of our accepting the totalitarian assumption of Omniscience," he insisted. "And to this extent it contributes to the continuance of the arguing, debating, never-settling—anything—finally methods of political democracy." Maybe that was whistling in the dark, but sometimes a whistle is all you've got.

The more argument the better is what the North Carolina-born George V. Denny, Jr., was banking on, anyway, after a neighbor of his, in Scarsdale, declared that he so strongly disagreed with F.D.R. that he never listened to him. Denny, who helped run something called the League for Political Education, thought that was nuts. In 1935, he launched "America's Town Meeting of the Air,"

an hour-long debate program, broadcast nationally on NBC's Blue Network. Each episode opened with a town crier ringing a bell and hollering, "Town meeting tonight! Town meeting tonight!" Then Denny moderated a debate, usually among three or four panelists, on a controversial subject (Does the U.S. have a truly free press? Should schools teach politics?), before opening the discussion up to questions from an audience of more than a thousand people. The debates were conducted at a lecture hall, usually in New York, and broadcast to listeners gathered in public libraries all over the country, so that they could hold their own debates once the show ended. "We are living today on the thin edge of history," Max Lerner, the editor of *The Nation*, said in 1938, during a "Town Meeting of the Air" debate on the meaning of democracy. His panel included a Communist, an exile from the Spanish Civil War, a conservative American political economist, and a Russian columnist. "We didn't expect to settle anything, and therefore we succeeded," the Spanish exile said at the end of the hour, offering this definition: "A democracy is a place where a 'Town Meeting of the Air' can take place."

No one expected anyone to come up with an undisputable definition of democracy, since the point was disputation. Asking people about the meaning and the future of democracy and listening to them argue it out was really only a way to get people to stretch their civic muscles. "Democracy can only be saved by democratic men and women," Dorothy Thompson once said. "The war against democracy begins by the destruction of the democratic temper, the democratic method and the democratic heart. If the democratic temper be exacerbated into wanton unreasonableness, which is the essence of the evil, then a victory has been won for the evil we despise and prepare to defend ourselves against, even though it's 3,000 miles away and has never moved."

The most ambitious plan to get Americans to show up in the same room and argue with one another in the nineteen-thirties came out of Des Moines, Iowa, from a one-eyed former bricklayer named John W. Studebaker, who had become the superintendent of the city's schools. Studebaker, who after the

Second World War helped create the G.I. Bill, had the idea of opening those schools up at night, so that citizens could hold debates. In 1933, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation and support from the American Association for Adult Education, he started a five-year experiment in civic education.

The meetings began at a quarter to eight, with a fifteen-minute news update, followed by a forty-five-minute lecture, and thirty minutes of debate. The idea was that “the people of the community of every political affiliation, creed, and economic view have an opportunity to participate freely.” When Senator Guy Gillette, a Democrat from Iowa, talked about “Why I Support the New Deal,” Senator Lester Dickinson, a Republican from Iowa, talked about “Why I Oppose the New Deal.” Speakers defended Fascism. They attacked capitalism. They defended capitalism. Within the first nine months of the program, thirteen thousand of Des Moines’s seventy-six thousand adults had attended a forum. The program got so popular that in 1934 F.D.R. appointed Studebaker the U.S. Commissioner of Education and, with the eventual help of Eleanor Roosevelt, the program became a part of the New Deal, and received federal funding. The federal forum program started out in ten test sites—from Orange County, California, to Sedgwick County, Kansas, and Pulaski County, Arkansas. It came to include almost five hundred forums in forty-three states and involved two and a half million Americans. Even people who had steadfastly predicted the demise of democracy participated. “It seems to me the only method by which we are going to achieve democracy in the United States,” Du Bois wrote, in 1937.

The federal government paid for it, but everything else fell under local control, and ordinary people made it work, by showing up and participating. Usually, school districts found the speakers and decided on the topics after collecting ballots from the community. In some parts of the country, even in rural areas, meetings were held four and five times a week. They started in schools and spread to Y.M.C.A.s and Y.W.C.A.s, labor halls, libraries, settlement houses, and businesses, during lunch hours.

Many of the meetings were broadcast by radio. People who went to those meetings debated all sorts of things:

Should the Power of the Supreme Court Be Altered?
Do Company Unions Help Labor?
Do Machines Oust Men?
Must the West Get Out of the East?
Can We Conquer Poverty?
Should Capital Punishment Be Abolished?
Is Propaganda a Menace?
Do We Need a New Constitution?
Should Women Work?
Is America a Good Neighbor?
Can It Happen Here?

These efforts don’t always work. Still, trying them is better than talking about the weather, and waiting for someone to hand you an umbrella.

When a terrible hurricane hit New England in 1938, Dr. Lorine Pruette, a Tennessee-born psychologist who had written an essay called “Why Women Fail,” and who had urged F.D.R. to name only women to his Cabinet, found herself marooned at a farm in New Hampshire with a young neighbor, sixteen-year-old Alice Hooper, a high-school sophomore. Waiting out the storm, they had nothing to do except listen to the news, which, needless to say, concerned the future of democracy. Alice asked Pruette a question: “What is it everyone on the radio is talking about—what is this democracy—what does it mean?” Somehow, in the end, NBC arranged a coast-to-coast broadcast, in which eight prominent thinkers—two ministers, three professors, a former ambassador, a poet, and a journalist—tried to explain to Alice the meaning of democracy. American democracy had found its “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus” moment, except that it was messier, and more interesting, because those eight people didn’t agree on the answer. Democracy, Alice, is the darnedest thing.

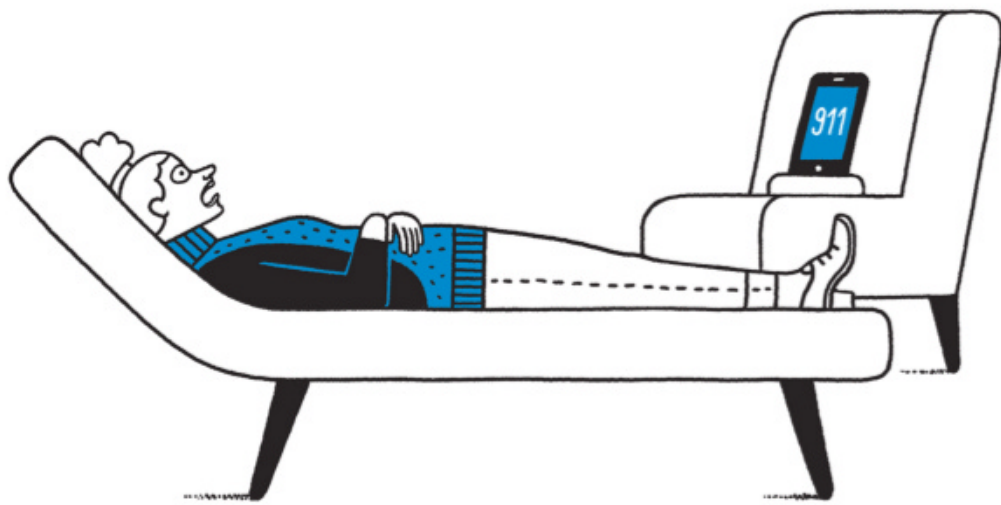
That broadcast was made possible by the workers who brought electricity to rural New Hampshire; the legislators who signed the 1934 federal Communications Act, mandating public-interest broadcasting; the executives at NBC who decided that it was important to run this program; the two ministers, the three professors, the former ambassador, the poet, and the journalist who gave their time, for free, to a public forum, and agreed to disagree

without acting like asses; and a whole lot of Americans who took the time to listen, carefully, even though they had plenty of other things to do. Getting out of our current jam will likely require something different, but not entirely different. And it will be worth doing.

A decade-long debate about the future of democracy came to a close at the end of the nineteen-thirties—but not because it had been settled. In 1939, the World’s Fair opened in Queens, with a main exhibit featuring the saga of democracy and a chipper motto: “The World of Tomorrow.” The fairgrounds included a Court of Peace, with pavilions for every nation. By the time the fair opened, Czechoslovakia had fallen to Germany, though, and its pavilion couldn’t open. Shortly afterward, Edvard Beneš, the exiled President of Czechoslovakia, delivered a series of lectures at the University of Chicago on, yes, the future of democracy, though he spoke less about the future than about the past, and especially about the terrible present, a time of violently unmoored traditions and laws and agreements, a time “of moral and intellectual crisis and chaos.” Soon, more funereal bunting was brought to the World’s Fair, to cover Poland, Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. By the time the World of Tomorrow closed, in 1940, half the European hall lay under a shroud of black.

The federal government stopped funding the forum program in 1941. Americans would take up their debate about the future of democracy, in a different form, only after the defeat of the Axis. For now, there was a war to fight. And there were still essays to publish, if not about the future, then about the present. In 1943, E. B. White got a letter in the mail, from the Writers’ War Board, asking him to write a statement about “The Meaning of Democracy.” He was a little weary of these pieces, but he knew how much they mattered. He wrote back, “Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is.” It meant something once. And, the thing is, it still does. ♦

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HELLO, 911?

BY SAMANTHA IRBY

Hello, 911? There's a middle-aged dad standing next to the yogurts in Trader Joe's actively strumming a guitar and trying to make meaningful eye contact with every harried person trying to get a box of Pastry Pups on a dismal Saturday afternoon, and everyone other than me seems to be maintaining a relaxed and happy exterior despite the fact that this is terribly embarrassing and he is singing Bob Marley. Please get me out of here. All I wanted was a bag of reasonably priced shelled nuts sold to me by a relatively attractive retired shoe salesman in a faded Hawaiian shirt. Is that really too much to fucking ask?

Hello, 911? I am the first person at this party.

Hello, 911? I've been lying awake for an hour each night for the past eight months, reliving a two-second awkward experience I had in front of a casual acquaintance three years ago.

Hello, 911? Is some invisible force going to push me down this flight of stairs?

Hello, 911? I was watching that show "Greenleaf," on the Oprah network, and these two characters were riding in a car and having a passionate conversation, and dude turned to lady and I was gripped with what can only be described as stomach-churning panic as my entire body clenched in antici-

pation of the car jumping the curb and crashing through the plate-glass window of a laundromat, because the dude took his eyes entirely off the road for at least twelve seconds. When was the first movie made? 1888? And, after all those years of practice, people still can't film a realistic conversation in a moving car? The driver's eyes need to be on the Toyota in front of him, Oprah Winfrey. I'm going to have a fucking stroke.

Hello, 911? This takeout place doesn't have online ordering.

Hello, 911? Which line is moving faster, the one I'm in or that other line, and do you think I should switch? Does it matter? It's not like I have anywhere to be, but just standing here makes me feel like my organs are going to burst out of my skin. I can't prove it, but I think this line is moving incrementally slower. Why does that make me feel like I'm losing a race? Should I just stay where I am, or do you think it's O.K. if I ease over to Lane 8 in a way that silently telegraphs to the check-out girl, "I'm not mad, just having an inexplicable panic attack, please ignore me"? If I move to that other line, will the Target gods smite me by throwing a clearance-rack shirt with a missing price tag into that lady's cart? Why did I even come here?

Hello, 911? What if I fall asleep on this bus?

Hello, 911? That lady caught me taking a selfie and walked away before I could convincingly pretend to be holding my phone at this angle for some other reason.

Hello, 911? It's eleven-thirty at night and I've got an important meeting (LOL) tomorrow morning at nine-thirty. I set my alarm for eight. That should give me plenty of time, right? Google Maps says it's probably going to take seventeen minutes to get there from my hotel, barring any major traffic, but what if the Lyft driver is late? Alternatively, what if the doorman can't find a cab? I'm planning to go down at nine. Does that leave enough time for me to get eggs from room service? But they run late sometimes, right? Should I risk it? It's midnight now and I think I'll be hungry in the morning, but what if I'm not? Then I'm stuck waiting for eggs I don't want. Maybe I should set my alarm for eight-thirty. I definitely want to sleep off this Xanax, but does that give me enough time to take an actual crevice-cleaning, hair-washing shower? Should I be honest about who I really am as a person and factor in twenty minutes of bedside-sitting-and-staring-into-space time? It's twelve-thirty, but to be safe I'm going to set the alarm for seven-thirty. Should I attempt to impress these people with eye makeup, or do they not care because they are serious businesspersons? Let me just go ahead and set my phone for 6:55, so I have plenty of time to contour and blend (i.e., totally fuck it up and wipe it all off while crying). Since I'm up, it wouldn't hurt to iron my pants, just in case I can't hide my legs under a table. Why does everyone want to "meet" on couches these days? An electric chair would be more relaxing. Wait a minute—it's already one o'clock?!

Hello, 911? My friend just left me a voice mail.

Hello, 911? My brain is a prison, and anxiety is the warden. I am besieged by an undeniable urge to peel off my skin like the layers of an onion until death claims me and I find relief in its cool embrace, and I know it took me a long time to finally call and I'm not a hundred per cent sure that this qualifies as an emergency, but I think I've reached my limit and I might need some help.

O.K., sure, I'll hold. ♦

RESCUE WORK

The fight to preserve African-American history.

BY CASEY CEP



No one knows what happened to Gabriel's body. Born into slavery the year his country declared its freedom, he trained as a plantation blacksmith and was hired out to foundries in Richmond, Virginia, where he befriended other enslaved people. Together, they absorbed, from the revolutionary spirit of the era, ideas of independence that were never meant for them. Gabriel kept hammering out whatever his masters demanded, but in secret he began to forge a network of thousands of enslaved and free blacks who planned to rally under a flag stitched with borrowed words: "Death or Liberty." But a terrible thunderstorm flooded the roads

on what was to be the day of their revolt, in August, 1800, and during the delay two of the conspirators betrayed the rest. Within a few weeks, twenty-six of them were hanged. Gabriel was executed less than a mile from the church where Patrick Henry spoke the words that inspired what would have been their battle cry. Some historians believe that Gabriel's body was left in the burial ground beside the gallows, where it would have joined thousands of other black bodies that, consigned to the bottomland of the city, washed into Shockoe Creek whenever it rained.

Shockoe Bottom, as that valley is known, was the center of Richmond's

slave district. In the three decades before the Civil War, more than three hundred thousand men, women, and children were sold in Richmond, the second-largest slave market in the United States. Not every enslaved person who passed through left the city; many were made to work in its tobacco warehouses, ironworks, and flour mills. Between 1750 and 1816, most of the African-Americans who died in Richmond were interred in what was known as the Burial Ground for Negroes. After that, the graves at Shockoe Bottom were abandoned, and residents claimed more and more of the land for themselves, ignoring the coffins and bones. The city turned what was left into a jail, and then a dog pound; later, state and federal officials carved I-95 through its center.

"I remember thinking there was nothing left," Brent Leggs told me recently, of his first encounter with Shockoe Bottom. Leggs, the director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is typically contacted to help preserve something, even if it is only a crumbling foundation. But in Richmond he was called on to help save what no longer exists.

The first wave of protests began in 2002, when Shockoe Bottom was still a parking lot. Community groups like the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality organized to reclaim the burial ground and memorialize Richmond's connections to the slave trade. The Defenders held walking tours, educational forums, and vigils at the site. Activists demanded that the city "get your asphalt off our ancestors," and, although it took a decade, the pavement was eventually cleared. In 2013, the group helped launch another wave of protests after the city proposed building a minor-league baseball stadium at Shockoe Bottom, which would have destroyed what archeological evidence remained and would have desecrated the burial ground. That was when the National Trust stepped in.

A year later, Leggs and his colleagues declared Shockoe Bottom one of America's most endangered historic places, a designation that the Trust assigns to about a dozen sites annually, fostering public pressure to halt development that would destroy them. The city withdrew

For decades, structures such as Rosenwald schools were deemed insignificant.

its plans for the stadium in 2015; the Defenders then proposed a large memorial park, one that would connect Gabriel's rebellion with the war that divided the country and also with the one that founded it. For now, the city says that it can't afford a park of that size, and Shockoe Bottom remains in limbo.

The struggle over the physical record of slavery and uprising in Richmond is part of a larger, long-overdue national movement to preserve African-American history. Of the more than ninety-five thousand entries on the National Register of Historic Places—the list of sites deemed worthy of preservation by the federal government—only two per cent focus on the experiences of black Americans. Preservationists like Leggs are working with activists, archeologists, and historians to change those numbers. They are fighting to preserve and promote such sites as 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, in the Bronx, known as the apartment building where hip-hop was born; the Pauli Murray Family Home, in Durham, North Carolina, the birthplace of the queer civil-rights lawyer; and Fort Monroe, in Hampton Roads, Virginia, an Army base on the spot where African captives first arrived in this country, in 1619, which became known as Freedom's Fortress after five hundred thousand slaves emancipated themselves there during the Civil War. One site at a time, Leggs and his colleagues are changing not only what history we preserve but what we think it means to preserve it.

Historic preservation has its own history. The first preservation laws in the United States protected the land itself, beginning with Ulysses S. Grant's designation of Yellowstone National Park, in 1872. But, with the Civil War barely over, battlefields, cemeteries, and burial sites quickly became a priority for preservation. The passage of the Antiquities Act of 1906 gave Presidents the right to create national monuments, and that meant that they could protect both the terrain and the artifacts of indigenous cultures found there.

Ten years later, the creation of the National Park Service (N.P.S.) granted federal lawmakers more power "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wild life therein."

In subsequent years, the category of "historic objects" broadened, and the N.P.S. got involved in preservation efforts at places like Jamestown; eventually, the agency set national policies for surveying historic and archeological sites, protecting significant properties, and erecting historical markers. In 1949, Harry Truman signed legislation creating the National Trust, and in 1966 Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Historic Preservation Act (N.H.P.A.), which, among other things, established the National Register of Historic Places and the standards of the National Historic Landmarks Program, provided federal funding for the National Trust, and opened preservation offices in all fifty states.

Since its founding, the N.H.P.A. has identified nearly two million locations worthy of preservation and has engaged tens of millions of Americans in the work of doing so. It has helped to generate an estimated two million jobs and more than a hundred billion dollars in private investments. But, because many biases were written into the criteria that determine how sites are selected, those benefits have gone mostly to white Americans. One of the criteria for preservation is architectural significance, meaning that modest buildings like slave cabins and tenement houses were long excluded from consideration. By the time preservationists took notice of structures like those, many lacked the physical integrity to merit protection. Destruction abetted decay, and some historically black neighborhoods were actively erased—deliberately targeted by arson in the years after Reconstruction or displaced in later decades by highway construction, gentrification, and urban renewal.

While state and federal institutions were largely neglecting these areas, communities of color began protecting them on their own. Leggs dates the formal beginning of African-American historic preservation to 1917, when the National Association of Colored Women organized a campaign to pay off the mortgage on Cedar Hill, a Gothic Revival house in Washington, D.C., that had belonged to Frederick Douglass. "Even when it wasn't called 'preservation,' this work was already happening," Leggs told me on a visit to Cedar Hill

in December. The estate sits high above the neighborhood of Anacostia, offering a clear view of the Capitol and the Washington Monument. Leggs, who is forty-seven, bounded up the hundred brick steps from the visitors' center to the house as though it were his first time there, eager to show me Douglass's bookshelves and writing desk, his portraits of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the table where he dined with Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. "It's a tangible way of learning about his life, of interacting with all that he accomplished," Leggs said of the site, which is now managed by the N.P.S. We talked about the dumbbells in Douglass's bedroom, and how he liked to lift weights; Leggs, who is roughly the same height as the six-foot-tall abolitionist, wondered why the bed was so short (a question apparently asked at historic sites around the world).

Five decades after the National Association of Colored Women rallied to save Cedar Hill, another group of black women worked to salvage what remained of Weeksville, an antebellum free-black community in Brooklyn that was started by the longshoreman James Weeks, in the early nineteenth century. These activists were led by the artist Joan Maynard, who argued that black history needed the same protections as black lives, and that the imperilment of the two was related. "We've got to make sure our kids know how they got here, and what those who came before did to try and make a better life," she said. It was her hope that the homeownership, urban farming, and commitment to liberty of Weeksville's earliest residents might inspire future ones. Through those efforts, four houses from the original Weeksville settlement were added to the National Register by 1972.

Around the same time, three men in a historically black neighborhood in New Orleans founded a community-improvement group, which led to the formation of the Treme Historic District, where Creole cottages and shotgun residences testify to generations of black life. Five years later, in Florida, the writer Alice Walker found the lost burial site of Zora Neale Hurston, and set in motion a revival of Hurston's historically black incorporated home town of Eatonville, which was added to the National Register

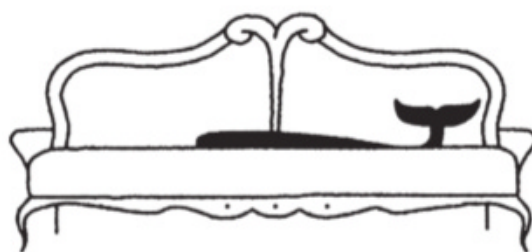
in 1998. That discovery also renewed interest in Hurston's writing; her books were reprinted and elevated to the literary canon. Historic preservation and artistic renaissance often go hand in hand: in Congo Square, the area of Treme where enslaved people gathered to drum and dance, contemporary musicians honor that history by continuing to perform in what is now known as Louis Armstrong Park.

Eventually, the federal government caught up with the work of descendant communities, not least because one of those descendants arrived in the White House. Michelle Obama is the great-granddaughter of a Pullman railroad porter, and, in 2015, Barack Obama designated the Pullman National Monument, in Chicago, to honor one of the country's first planned company towns, a crucible of the labor and civil-rights movements. Pullman was one of twenty-nine monuments that President Obama protected through the Antiquities Act, more than any of his predecessors. Several of them focus on African-American history, including the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, in Maryland, and the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, the centerpiece of which is the A. G. Gaston Motel, a black-owned business where the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., stayed while planning the protests that helped spur the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Politicians have long enjoyed cutting ribbons and giving speeches at the dedications of landmarks; even those who oppose funding the work of preservation know that saving endangered places can serve political ends. It's not remarkable, then, that President Donald Trump has designated national monuments. But some of his selections have been surprising. His first, in October, 2018, was Camp Nelson, a Civil War site in Kentucky that is best known for what happened after the Union Army lifted its ban on African-American troops: ten thousand black men enlisted at the camp, and their family members, who technically remained enslaved, were given refugee status there. Last year, Trump made the home of the civil-rights activist Medgar Evers, in Mississippi, a national monument, too.

The President's critics suggested that both designations were political favors: the first to Kentucky Republicans (Camp Nelson is the state's first federal monument) and the second to Mississippi Republicans, including Evers's older brother, Charles, who, in 2016, provided Trump with one of his more unexpected endorsements. But both sites had been under consideration for monument status for years. If anything, the designations might have been the Trump Administration's political favor to itself—an attempt to redeem the White House after its inflammatory handling of the events in Charlottesville during the summer of 2017, when white supremacists gathered to protest, among other things, the removal of a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee and one of them murdered a counter-protester named Heather Heyer.

Leggs speaks eloquently about the "powerful collision of culture, heritage, and public space" that produced the tragedy in Charlottesville, and about the way that it has simultaneously obscured and illuminated the work that he and his colleagues do. Since Charlottesville, the debate over Confederate monuments has garnered far more attention than questions about what other sites and histories deserve to be preserved. At the same time, that debate has only reinforced what Leggs has believed for decades: that preservation is political, and that the kinds of places and struc-



tures that we protect are less an indication of what we valued in the past than a matter of what we venerate today.

It was after Charlottesville that Leggs and his colleagues created the Action Fund, the largest-ever campaign to preserve African-American historic sites. In its first year alone, the Fund received more than eight hundred applications requesting nearly ninety-one million dollars in grants. Last year, the National Trust

funded twenty-two recipients, including the oldest extant black church in the country, the African Meeting House in Boston; the house that Harriet Tubman bought from Senator William Seward in Auburn, New York, in 1858, and lived in for more than fifty years; and the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, where, five years ago, nine members of the congregation were murdered by a white supremacist.

To support those and other efforts, Leggs has so far raised more than twenty million dollars for the Action Fund, from private individuals and nonprofits, including the Ford Foundation, the J.P.B. Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Elizabeth Alexander, a poet and the Mellon Foundation's president, told me that for a long time communities of color have had to "carry around knowledge and stories in our bodies," because resources were not devoted to preserving the spaces that held those stories. She describes what Leggs and his colleagues do as "rescue work."

Pursuing and maintaining relationships with donors like Mellon is essential to the success of the Action Fund, especially since the federal government stopped allocating funds to the National Trust in 1997. Leggs is gifted at that work, in part because he talks about historic sites with the kind of affection and enthusiasm that most people reserve for their children; given a single ceramic tile from a sanitarium or the boarded-up window of an abandoned motel, he can conjure a forgotten world with exuberant precision, converting entire audiences to his cause. But he is also persuasive because he understands the economics of historic preservation—not only how costly it can be but how profitable. Parks, monuments, and historic registers are not just designations; they are also funding directives. In a virtuous cycle, they can enable infrastructure improvements for beautification and safety, which promote tourism, which in turn promotes business development. Traditionally, however, the communities that benefit the most from historic preservation are the ones that need it the least. Critics of historic preservation often regard it primarily as a way for wealthy property owners to fend off development, including, all too frequently, affordable or high-density housing. In less affluent areas, des-

ignations are rare, and the same forces that are caustic for residents also corrode their history. At Weeksville, for instance, it took decades of penny drives and neighborhood bake sales to secure the sort of preservation that Colonial and Confederate sites often attain in a few years. Even then, the site's status remained precarious: encroached on by development in the thirties, forties, and fifties, it was rescued in the sixties, only to have one of its protected homes burned down in the eighties and another vandalized in the early nineties. Only last spring, after the Weeksville Heritage Center launched a crowdfunding campaign to stave off closure, did New York City formally partner with the center, insuring increased financial support.

That kind of vulnerability is typical in marginalized communities, where few historic sites will ever sustain themselves with endowments or entry fees alone. As a result, part of the work of the Action Fund involves helping those communities identify "adaptive reuses" for historic spaces, a process that can lead to an afterlife that not many would recognize as preservation. Instead of turning sites into traditional museums, preservationists in communities of color have become more creative about what constitutes conservation.

One of Leggs's favorite examples is Villa Lewaro, in Irvington, New York, the estate of Madam C.J. Walker, a black hair-care entrepreneur and America's first self-made female millionaire. The Trust convened African-American businesspeople, artists, and activists, who considered preservation ideas ranging from a spa and salon to an arts venue for concerts that would honor Walker's support of artists like Vertner Woodson Tandy, the pioneering black architect who designed the spectacular thirty-four-room mansion. The Trust settled on a business angle, helping to arrange the sale of Villa Lewaro to Richelieu Dennis, the owner of *Essence*, who plans to make it the home of a hundred-million-dollar think tank supporting black female entrepreneurs. "It's about economic development," Leggs told me. "It's about the empowerment of people as much as it's about the history."

That kind of empowerment does not come just from preserving new sites; Leggs and his colleagues also advocate for the reinterpretation of old ones.



"Really, what's the point of being married if we still have to get dressed and go out?"

Twenty years ago, Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr., dropped into an appropriations bill three paragraphs encouraging the National Park Service to acknowledge "in all of their public displays and multimedia educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War." That legislative maneuver helped bring about a sweeping interpretive correction to this country's heritage tourism, and ultimately led to new exhibits around the U.S., including the Best Farm Slave Village, at the Monocacy National Battlefield.

"A lot of our work is to balance America's collective memory," Leggs said. But that work can't be accomplished without rebalancing something else. To diversify historic preservation, you need to address not just what is preserved but who is preserving it—because, as it turns out, what counts as history has a lot to do with who is doing the counting.

Leggs told me that he has long felt like "one of one" in his field, and for good reason. African-Americans constitute less than six per cent of the more than twenty thousand employees of the National Park Service, and they are underrepresented in most other careers related to historic preservation, accounting for not quite four per cent of academic

archeologists, five per cent of licensed architects and engineers, and less than one per cent of professional preservationists.

Leggs came to the field by chance. He grew up in Paducah, Kentucky, a small city on the Ohio River, where he watched his church raise funds to repair its roof, and attended annual family reunions that always found their way to cemeteries, where they cleaned, mowed the grass, and landscaped the graves. After studying marketing at the University of Kentucky, he received a master's degree at the business school there. Leggs has a twin brother, who went to work at a now defunct uranium-enrichment plant in Paducah; his younger sister stayed in the area, too. Leggs had been so focussed on getting his degrees that he didn't know what to do with them after graduation. He was interested in design, and thought about taking a furniture-making class at the University of Kentucky's School of Architecture, but when he went to enroll a dean recruited him for the graduate program in historic preservation, partly by telling him that he could be the program's first black graduate. "I had no idea about architectural history, no formal understanding of preservation, but it felt right," Leggs said.

His first field assignment was to inventory Rosenwald schools. Devised by

Booker T. Washington and funded by the philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the schools served black children during the era of segregated education. Almost five thousand of them were built in fifteen Southern states between 1912 and 1932, and they educated more than six hundred thousand students, including some of the very civil-rights leaders who later helped to make them obsolete. In the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, while the schoolhouses that had served rural whites were romanticized and preserved, ninety per cent of the Rosenwald schools were demolished or allowed to fall into disrepair.

Leggs's task was to find and document those that remained in Kentucky. While walking through them, "I had this multisensory experience," he recalled. "I could see, touch, smell, hear the creaking floorboards when I stepped inside." That strange feeling made sense, Leggs said, when he learned, later, that his parents had both attended Rosenwald schools. His mother had died when he was a teen-ager, but the school visits prompted conversations with his father about the family's history, convincing Leggs of the power that physical places have in shaping cultural memory.

As a graduate student, Leggs received one of the National Trust's Mildred Colodny diversity scholarships, and since then he has concentrated on bringing

new people into his field. Doing so involves credentialing new colleagues, and also convincing community organizers, artists, real-estate developers, and other professionals that they are already doing the work of preservation. "I think part of what we want to do is to reconstruct the identity of traditional preservationists," Leggs told me. As an assistant clinical professor at the University of Maryland School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, Leggs sometimes interacts with students who have never met a preservationist of color, or whose portfolios would never have included sites of African-American history if not for his encouragement. He also meets regularly with students who are taking part in the Action Fund's campus events or preservation fieldwork.

Last fall, Leggs met with Monique Robinson, an undergraduate at Morgan State University, in Baltimore—one of a hundred and four operating historically black colleges and universities around the country, and one of several where the National Trust is working to promote historic preservation, in part by protecting buildings on campus, including some designed by pioneering black architects like Leon Bridges and Albert Cassell. Robinson, a senior who came to Morgan to study architecture, had learned about preservation through a National Trust course. "I always thought

I would just go join a firm and work my way up," she said. "But then I met Brent, and I saw how preservation can look at what was there before and understand what's important to a community."

Robinson and Leggs stood talking in the long, light-filled atrium of the school's Center for the Built Environment and Infrastructure Studies. Leggs had to leave that afternoon to catch a train to New York, for a meeting at the Langston Hughes House, in Harlem; Robinson was preparing for exams and finishing grad-school applications. But they got to talking about Old Jenkins, a building at Morgan State that was slated for demolition. To its detractors, the building, a brutalist behavioral-science headquarters, looks like a fortress that swallowed a ziggurat. Worse, its blocky façade obstructs the view from Carnegie Hall, one of the most distinguished buildings on campus. "Oh, Jenkins," Robinson said, smiling as if she'd been asked about her first crush. "I really just love it."

Leggs, who feels the same, tried to convert me to the cause. During a tour, he pointed out how Jenkins reflects not only the global history of design but the history of Morgan State. Named for one of the university's former presidents, the building was designed by Louis Edwin Fry, Sr., the first African-American to receive a master's degree in architecture from Harvard. Its hidden amphitheatre has seen forty-five years of lectures, homecomings, and commencements. Yet any effort to preserve Jenkins would face serious difficulties: decades of deferred maintenance have made it extraordinarily costly to restore. And, even setting aside the question of money, it suffers from a problem that often haunts historic preservation—to the general public, some important places just seem too ugly, insignificant, or inconvenient to keep around.

Take the Hill, a historically black neighborhood in the town of Easton, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, that is the site of a preservation project that even a decade ago might have been met with confusion. It is not immediately obvious why this area of several blocks is historically significant, but the collection of black churches, black businesses, and dozens of single-family homes is thought by some archeol-



"No, Al, you can't just 'stake your reputation' on it."

ogists to be the oldest continuously occupied free-black community in the country—perhaps two decades older than Treme. With the backing of the National Trust, academics at Morgan State have led an effort to research and reconstruct the Hill, unearthing the stories of early residents, like Grace Brooks, a midwife who freed herself and her family in 1788 and became one of the first black homeowners in town, and Joseph Chain, a black businessman who opened his own barbershop and grocery store after his arrival in 1810. The Hill also sheds new light on the story of Frederick Douglass, who watched those lives unfold in freedom while he was enslaved in the same county and imprisoned in the same town.

For Leggs, the Hill offers a compelling demonstration of all that historic preservation can accomplish in communities of color. In keeping with the early history of homeownership there, organizers and local officials are using tax breaks and development funds to help renters become homeowners, hoping to forestall developer-led gentrification and insure that the neighborhood will continue to be occupied by descendants of the original free blacks who settled it. At the same time, Morgan State is addressing the pipeline problem in the field of preservation by recruiting college students and young people from the neighborhood for research, analysis, and archeological digs.

The town of Easton has embraced the Hill, supporting not only the effort to document its history but also initiatives to retain minority families. Historical maps are available online and in the county tourism office, and local schoolchildren now go on field trips to see a historically black community that dates back to the Revolutionary War era, following a walking tour that brings to life what they might not otherwise have been taught, in situ or at all.

Not all sites move from the margins to the mainstream so smoothly. At Shockoe Bottom, the Defenders are still fighting to commemorate the legacy of Gabriel's rebellion and the memory of all the other African-Americans who were sold and buried there. Economic development and historic preservation seem at odds, and even many commu-

nity stakeholders who agree about the importance of the site disagree about how best to memorialize it. After the Trust included Shockoe Bottom on its most-endangered-places list, the city proposed preserving a single small area, the so-called Devil's Half Acre, on which the slave trader Robert Lumpkin ran a jail. The Defenders are advocating for a nine-acre memorial park centered on the burial ground. They point to an economic study commissioned by the Trust, which found that an \$8.7-million investment in that park would generate \$11.5 million in jobs.

Ana Edwards, an artist and a historian, moved to Richmond in the late eighties and learned that two of her ancestors had been sold out of the city. She has co-chaired the Sacred Ground Project with her husband for the last fifteen years, some of those while working on a master's degree in history. Her research focusses on the life of a free black man accused but ultimately exonerated of participating in Gabriel's rebellion. Edwards believes that Shockoe Bottom should be a site of reflection and remembrance but also of resistance, offering visitors an alternative to the history that Richmond has long revered. Four of this country's more than seventeen hundred public memorials to the Confederacy stand not far from Shockoe Bottom, on Monument Avenue—statues of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Thomas (Stonewall) Jackson, and J. E. B. Stuart. As in Charlottesville, white supremacists have rallied to protect those Confederate monuments, a reminder of how necessary African-American historic preservation is. "I don't know if this space can do all the work our society needs it to," Edwards told me one night, while walking through Shockoe Bottom, shouting to be heard over the sound of eighteen-wheelers passing on the interstate overhead. "But we need this place."

Mayor Levar Stoney, who was elected in 2016, agrees that Shockoe Bottom is an important site for the city and for the country. "Our history in Richmond is good, bad, and ugly," he told me. "And I think we owe it to our ancestors and the descendants of these slaves to tell the complete story, no matter how bad or ugly it might have been." More than a year ago, his administration established

a working group called the Shockoe Alliance, which includes people from the Sacred Ground Project, the Slave Trail Commission, and Preservation Virginia, and also from the Shockoe Neighborhood Association and the Shockoe Business Association. To date, they have reached no agreement on Shockoe Bottom's future. But Leggs, who has the patience of someone who spends his time thinking in centuries, is optimistic that, through the Shockoe Alliance, the city will agree on an appropriate plan for the site. He knows that the arc of history is long and unpredictable, and he is used to doing his work one donation and one student at a time. He has seen that patience rewarded with more recognized sites and with the involvement of more people who have the knowledge and commitment to save them. He has also seen how slowly a project can unfold. His career began nearly two decades ago with the Rosenwald schools, and now he is involved in an effort to create a discontinuous national park that could include Rosenwald's childhood home, in Springfield; the corporate headquarters of Sears, Roebuck and Company, in Chicago; and a number of the schools throughout the South.

Yet Leggs also knows that some stories are more widely cherished than others. The interracial and interfaith friendship between Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington; the entrepreneurialism of Madam C. J. Walker and A. G. Gaston; the audacity and courage of the self-emancipated Frederick Douglass—it is comparatively easy to rally public support for preserving these inspiring legacies. It is a very different matter to persuade a municipality to memorialize its deep economic dependence on slavery. Shockoe Bottom is not just a more expensive place to preserve financially; it's more expensive emotionally and morally as well. "It should be a site of conscience," Leggs said. "A place where the truth is told, and visitors reflect, and where reconciliation can happen." Even if Leggs and the National Trust succeed in helping the Defenders for Freedom realize their vision in Richmond, as they have with so many other grassroots organizations in so many other cities and towns around the country, all they can do is preserve the past. The future is up to the rest of us. ♦

THE ROCK

A company set up by a female diamond hunter is finding some of the biggest uncut gems in history.

BY ED CAESAR

At the Karowe diamond mine, in Botswana, the most highly secured section of the compound is known as the Red Zone. This is where the gems are sorted. To enter, you must walk, alone, through a sequence of thick doors activated by fingerprint scans. Inside, there are strict rules. You cannot touch another human being. Everyone must wear a blue, pocketless smock. Phones are not allowed. In September, when I visited Karowe, I was given special dispensation to carry a notebook and a pen into the Red Zone. I was told that if I dropped my things I should bend down slowly to retrieve them, then stand up and show the recovered items to the nearest camera. On leaving the Red Zone, everyone, including chief executives, is strip-searched.

Nobody in the Red Zone ever touches a diamond with a naked hand. There are two sorting rooms, in which workers organize the mine's produce by size and shape, using gloves affixed to sealed and glass-fronted cabinets. Similar-sized stones are plucked from a conveyor belt and placed in a jar. At the end of the day, the jar is sucked upward to a vault through a transparent pneumatic tube—a process that evokes the Augustus Gloop scene from “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” When I visited the sorting rooms, workers pressed their noses to the glass and narrowed their eyes as they performed their duties. A light inside the glove boxes illuminated their faces like a vanity mirror.

Last year, at around 10 A.M. on Good Friday, a sorter named Otsogile Metseyabeng was working at his station when a stone bigger than a baseball tumbled onto his conveyor belt. Metseyabeng is a tall Botswanan man of thirty-seven, with a high, nervous laugh; sorters like him typically earn about twelve dollars an hour. In the Setswana

language, his first name means “How are you?” As Metseyabeng examined the stone, a shocked smile spread across his face.

The diamond was not only enormous but unusually shaped: it had both large, flat planes and jagged sections where the stone looked as if it had been smashed by a hammer. The whole thing was covered in a black carbon rind. It was impossible to see any of its interior, except through a few translucent spots. For a moment, Metseyabeng was the only person who knew about the existence of the world's largest rough diamond. He was struck dumb. Then he alerted a colleague, who called out, “*Teemane e tona tona!*”—“Very big diamond!” A supervisor arrived to verify the find. Normally, sorters who discover a valuable stone continue to work as usual. But Metseyabeng asked his boss for a ten-minute break, to compose himself.

The news travelled quickly but discreetly. Lucara, a Canadian company that owns the Karowe mine, is publicly traded. The discovery of a diamond that is exceptionally large or “fancy-colored”—tinged pink or green or blue—is deemed a material find, which can move Lucara's share price. In the days after such a discovery, a press release is issued. Before then, everyone who knows about the find must sign a nondisclosure agreement, promising not to discuss the matter with anyone, including his or her family. Although the discovery made Metseyabeng “very, very happy,” he told me, he kept his mouth shut. “I know that if I just say *something* it will be on social media and spread,” he added.

Ketshidile Tlhomelang, the Karowe mine's affable and bespectacled process manager, was informed of the discovery within minutes. He bolted over to the Red Zone and put his hands in the glove box, playing with the diamond.

He had been in the business for twenty-four years, and had studied minerals engineering in England, but he had never seen anything like this. Tlhomelang told me that he felt “blessed and elated.” He talked about the sensual pleasures of handling the diamond: its heaviness; the smoothness of its planes; how it slipped off his glove. But he also foresaw a problem in describing the stone. It looked to him somewhat like a computer mouse or a piece of obsidian. Certainly, it was not a glassy, limpid diamond from a fairy tale. It would not photograph well. But the raw fact of the discovery was urgent. It was seventeen hundred and sixty carats, unwashed—about twelve and a half ounces, the weight of a can of soup. After a cleaning, it weighed seventeen hundred and fifty-eight carats. No diamond that large had been discovered in more than a century.

While Tlhomelang was considering how to frame the news to his superiors, most of whom were off-site and unreachable on the Easter weekend, the mine's security manager called Naseem Lahri, the managing director of Lucara Botswana. Lahri, who is small and voluble, with a bright, forthright manner, is a trailblazer: a head-scarf-wearing Muslim executive in a majority-Christian country, and the first Botswanan woman ever to manage a diamond mine. When Lahri heard that a stone of more than seventeen hundred carats had been found, she assumed that it was a mistake.

Tlhomelang then phoned her to confirm the news. Lahri began to shiver. She was in South Africa, organizing a conference, and she postponed her engagements. She asked to see a picture. Tlhomelang warned her that the diamond was much more remarkable to the naked eye than it would appear in a photograph. Reluctantly, he sent her an image, then spent several



The Sewelô diamond, from Botswana, exceeds seventeen hundred carats. If much of its interior is clear, it's worth a fortune.

minutes explaining to her “how the picture did not convey the awesomeness of the stone.”

“Is that even a *diamond*?” Lahri said.

“Yah!” Thhomelang said.

Lahri, uncharacteristically emotional, said, “You know, we are making history.”

A big diamond is always a surprise. On January 26, 1905, at an open-pit mine in South Africa, a worker informed his manager, Frederick Wells, that a shiny object in the sidewall of the pit was reflecting the rays of the setting sun. The mine belonged to a South African of Irish descent named Thomas Cullinan. The site had not been in production long, and the pit was only some thirty feet deep. Wells clambered down and prized out the shiny object with his pocketknife. “Cor,” he said. “Mr. Cullinan will be pleased when he sees this!”

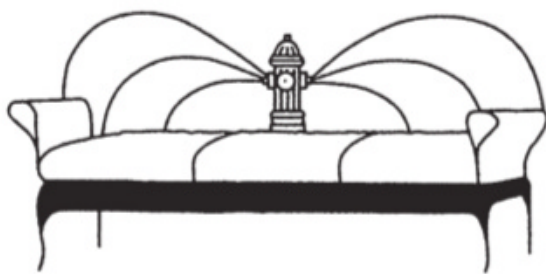
The diamond weighed more than thirty-one hundred carats. Up to that point, the largest diamond ever recovered was the Excelsior, which was found at Jagersfontein, in South Africa, in 1893; weighing nine hundred and ninety-five carats, it remains the fourth-largest diamond ever found. News of a diamond three times the size of the Excelsior reached Cullinan that night by telegram, at a dinner party he was hosting. Cullinan handed the telegram around the table and told his guests, “I expect they are wrong. It is probably a large crystal.”

The Cullinan, as it soon became known, is the biggest rough diamond in history, and one of the most beautiful: a geologist who examined it in 1905 called it “the purest of all the very big stones.” Blue-white, it contained a small air pocket that reflected light like a kaleidoscope. The Cullinan was later carved into more than a thousand carats’ worth of cut gems. The largest polished diamond from the stone, Cullinan I, or the Great Star of Africa—a five-hundred-and-thirty-carat pear-shaped diamond—now resides in Queen Elizabeth II’s scepter. Cullinan II, a three-hundred-and-seventeen-carat cushion-shaped diamond, adorns the front of her Imperial State Crown.

People have been trading diamonds for more than two millennia. From at

least the third century B.C., Indian merchants bought and sold diamonds that washed up in riverbeds, most likely as tools for cutting other gems. Pliny the Elder, in the first century A.D., wrote that diamond splinters “were much sought after by engravers.” The stones were also worn by rich and powerful people, although, in Pliny’s Rome, at least, a pearl was considered a more desirable jewel, because of its rarity. (Suetonius claimed that the Roman emperor Vitellius funded a journey from Rome to Lower Germany by selling just one of his mother’s pearls.) By the fifteenth century, diamonds from India had become more commonplace in the markets of Venice and other European cities. The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I is the first person known to have given his betrothed a diamond engagement ring, in 1477. He launched a trend among European aristocrats.

In 1866, diamonds were discovered in Kimberley, South Africa, sparking the world’s first diamond rush. Two decades later, Cecil Rhodes founded the De Beers consortium, which came to regulate the supply of rough stones, the manufacture of polished ones, and the marketplace itself. As a result, the price of diamonds rose steadily from the Great Depression onward, even as the price of other commodities swung wildly. De Beers has often been called the most successful cartel in the his-



tory of modern finance, and it’s difficult to propose a counter-argument. Even the South American drug gangs that emerged in the nineteen-eighties were constantly being endangered by murderous rivals. For a century, De Beers had the diamond field more or less to itself.

Diamonds have little innate value, and De Beers saw that it was necessary to imbue them with mystique. In the late nineteen-thirties, when global

interest in diamond jewelry was low, De Beers hired the Philadelphia advertising agency N. W. Ayer & Son to reinvigorate the allure of diamonds in the biggest market, the United States. A campaign sent the message to aspirant middle-class men that the only proper jewel to give one’s fiancée was a diamond. Prospective grooms were urged to learn the “four ‘C’s” that determine a diamond’s value: color, clarity, carat, and cut.

One Ayer copywriter, Frances Gerety, recalled that women formerly wanted their future husbands to spend money on “a washing machine, or a new car, anything but an engagement ring,” which was considered “money down the drain.” Gerety changed this perception by creating the slogan “A Diamond Is Forever” for De Beers. Ayer loaned extravagant diamond jewelry to celebrities; as one of the company’s publicists put it, “The big ones sell the little ones.” Demand grew, and so did supply. In the nineteen-twenties, about three million carats of rough diamonds were produced worldwide every year; by the end of the seventies, the number had climbed to some fifty million carats.

Around this time, diamond production began in various unstable countries in Africa, leading to concerns about the use of “blood diamonds” to fund wars or corrupt activities. In 2003, the Kimberley Process, a system of certification and authentication, was established to combat the nefarious use of diamonds, and to a significant degree it has removed stones of dubious provenance from the global supply chain; but they have not disappeared. Diamonds also continue to be used in scams, and in money laundering.

Demand, meanwhile, keeps soaring—particularly from newly wealthy countries such as India and China—and production remains high. Even though there are only a few dozen major diamond mines operating in the world, a hundred and fifty million carats of rough diamonds were produced in 2017, making it one of the highest-volume years on record. Several companies, including De Beers, have started to make synthetic diamonds, which are “grown” in a laboratory, and are cheaper than natural diamonds, adding even more volume to a marketplace that also con-

tains all the diamond jewels ever sold. Although the diamond market appears to be a paradox—an abundant resource that relies on the illusion of scarcity—it depends on a deep truth about human desire. We prize diamonds because others prize them.

Even so, diamond prices seem bafflingly high. Compare diamonds with an element like rhodium. Rhodium, which has a silvery sheen, has manifold uses in metallurgy, forms a key component in catalytic converters, and is considered the most expensive precious metal. An ounce costs about ten thousand dollars. A clear, internally flawless rough diamond of the same weight—a hundred and forty-two carats—would cost a jeweller about six million dollars. The Ayer copywriters worked dark magic.

Diamonds may not be as scarce as the industry would have people believe, but very large rough diamonds are vanishingly rare—except at one mine. Lucara has operated at Karowe for seven years, and during that time the firm has discovered an astonishing number of big stones, including three of the ten largest rough diamonds in history, and fifteen stones weighing more than three hundred carats. Since the discovery of the Cullinan, in 1905, Karowe is the only place where stones heavier than a thousand carats have been found. In 2015, Lucara recovered a near-pristine white diamond of eleven hundred and nine carats, which became known as the Lesedi La Rona—“Our Light,” in Setswana. The big black-covered diamond found by Otsogile Metseyabeng last April is now known as the Sewelô, which means “A Rare Find.” The price of a diamond increases exponentially as its weight rises, because of the scarcity of big stones. Lucara’s streak has made the company profitable at a time when many producers have struggled. It has also reshaped the diamond industry.

Lucara was founded in 2009 by two Canadian mining executives, Eira Thomas and her friend Catherine McLeod-Seltzer, together with the Swedish-Canadian mining billionaire Lukas Lundin, who serves as the firm’s chairman. At the time, both women were already thriving in a male-dom-



“What have you done with the original hardwood floors?”

inated sector. McLeod-Seltzer was one of the first female C.E.O.s in the mining industry. She had created and led several successful gold- and copper-mining ventures, particularly in South America, and was known for her expertise in raising funds. *The Northern Miner*, a trade magazine, named her a 1999 “Mining Man of the Year,” apparently without irony. Lucara is made in the image of its founders: most of its leadership team, and more than half its executives, in Botswana and outside the country, are women.

Eira Thomas, who is now Lucara’s C.E.O., has been prospecting since she was a child. Now fifty-one years old, with reddish hair, catlike features, and blue eyes, she has the sort of calm demeanor that one associates with ocean-going naval captains. When we met at

a hotel in the Mayfair district of London, in August, she wore ornate diamond rings and earrings made from stones discovered at her mines, but I sensed that she would have been just as happy decked head to toe in waterproof gear, hiking through the tundra.

Her father, Grenville Thomas, was born in Swansea, Wales, the son of a steelworker. He became a laborer in a Welsh coal mine when he was sixteen years old. He retrained as an engineer, and then, at twenty-three, immigrated to Canada, where he worked in nickel and gold mines. In 1965, Gren, as everyone called him, was asked to join a team prospecting in the Arctic. He didn’t know much about geology, but he instantly loved the prospector’s life: canoes, caribous, wolves.

In the seventies, Gren prospected

for copper and rare-earth metals near Yellowknife, in Canada's wild Northwest Territories. When Eira, his first child, turned six, she began joining him during her summer vacations. Gren and his team had to be constantly on the lookout to insure that little Eira was not eaten by a bear. Like her father, Eira was bright, curious, and outdoorsy. In college, she abandoned a plan to pursue medicine and got a geology degree instead. In 1991, when she was twenty-two, Gren asked her to cut short her post-graduation travels, in Africa, to help him look for diamonds in Canada.

Eira told her father, "Dad, there's no diamonds in Canada—everyone knows that."

In 1991, the industry was still dominated by De Beers, which sold nearly four billion dollars' worth of rough diamonds that year—about eighty per cent of the global supply. Most of that "rough" originated in the company's own mines, in southern Africa. There were also productive diamond mines in Russia and Australia. Canada did not feature on the diamantaire's map of the world.

However, for at least a decade there had been promising signs that significant diamond deposits might lie in the far north of the country. Diamonds were created billions of years ago, hundreds of kilometres below the surface of the earth, when carbon-bearing fluid was formed into crystals under intense heat and pressure. Over time, many of the stones were brought to the surface by subterranean volcanoes. The remains of these eruptions took the form of kimberlite "pipes"—cylinders of diamond-rich ore. Around Kimberley, South Africa, such pipes became known as "blue ground," on account of their bluish tinge, but in other countries kimberlite deposits are often a grayish green.

Finding evidence of a pipe is a good start to finding a diamond. In the early nineteen-eighties, several geologists, including some from De Beers, discovered "indicator minerals" suggesting that such pipes existed in significant numbers in Canada. Among the minerals were lilac-colored, magnesium-rich garnets—stones, found in soil and rivers, that were formed at

the same time as kimberlite, and that indicate the presence of a pipe nearby.

In 1991, two geologists, Chuck Fipke and Stu Blusson, used indicator chemistry to discover a pipe that later became known as the Ekati mine, near Lac de Gras, in the Slave Craton, an area about two hundred miles northeast of Yellowknife. It is a tough environment for exploration; in winter, temperatures regularly drop to minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit. Nevertheless, the discovery prompted a staking rush, with rival companies claiming ground near Fipke and Blusson's site. By the end of 1991, Gren Thomas's small company, Aber, had staked about a million acres of claims. Other firms staked even more ground.

In the summer of 1992, Eira Thomas travelled to the region with an exploration team, taking along her northern sled dog, Thor, which was part wolf, to protect the group from bears. The animal was not as helpful as Thomas had hoped: when a grizzly approached, the dog whined for its owner. On another occasion, Thor ran off, and was picked up by a rival exploration team, sixty miles away, whose members suspected that the dog was part of a convoluted espionage mission. The rivals sent Thor, by plane, to Yellowknife, rather than allow Thomas to retrieve the animal in person.

That summer, Aber and other mining companies found evidence of several kimberlite pipes. All of the prospectors were looking for what is known as an "economic" deposit: one rich enough in diamonds to merit the vast expense of mining in the desolate landscape of northern Canada. In the spring of 1994, Eira Thomas returned to Lac de Gras, as Aber's chief geologist. She was particularly interested in a prospect that lay beneath the ice-covered lake. Drilling vertically into the earth underneath a lake is problematic. In summer, the ice that the drilling equipment rests upon melts. Heavy rigs need to be moved before they sink into the water.

At the time, Aber was in some financial trouble, and Gren Thomas was negotiating a merger with a larger firm. Tests of the mineral chemistry of the lake convinced Eira Thomas that a rich deposit was buried beneath the water. She and her team drilled for samples, and the results were promising: the kind of kimberlite that augurs a plentiful

supply of diamonds. But they hadn't yet identified an economic pipe.

By late May, 1994, the ice was starting to melt. The drilling crew needed to move their equipment off the lake. But Thomas, seeking a sample of kimberlite from a prospect called A154 South, asked the miners to keep drilling. They worked with water sloshing up to their knees. On the last possible day of drilling, the team retrieved a sample. A two-carat diamond was embedded in one part of it. It's almost unheard of to find an actual diamond within a core—a tiny sample of the total material in a pipe. As soon as Thomas and the Aber team saw the glittering stone, which was the size of an M&M, they knew they'd struck pay dirt. That night, Thomas slept with the diamond under her pillow. She then flew to Vancouver. When she met with her father, she said nothing, and simply showed him the sparkling rock in her hand.

"Is this for real?" Gren said.

The pipes that Eira Thomas discovered became one of the world's richest diamond mines. By 2016, the deposit, now known as Diavik, had produced more than a hundred million carats. After the Thomases' breakthrough, other firms developed their own assets in Canada. Within a decade, Canada was producing sixteen per cent of the world's supply of gem-quality stones by volume, and Eira was known as the Queen of Diamonds. (Gren, who still works in the business, and retains his Welsh accent, says that he now asks Eira for advice, rather than the other way around.) The Canadian discoveries were part of a series of events in the nineties that loosened De Beers's stranglehold on the industry.

After that first success, Thomas and McLeod-Seltzer, who met through a mutual friend, formed a new company, Stornoway, which went on to develop Quebec's first diamond mine, Renard. But they longed to mine diamonds in southern Africa—particularly in Botswana, a stable democracy where the stones are plentiful and of high quality. Thomas recalls that Stornoway's mostly North American backers were wary about investing, believing that southern Africa was a high-risk area. So, in 2007, she and McLeod-Seltzer



At Karowe, in Botswana, workers find diamonds by examining ore in machines that resemble airport baggage scanners.

formed Lucara with Lukas Lundin, and began to raise money for an African diamond play.

Lucara had a bumpy start: it bid unsuccessfully on several sites. Then, in 2009, a site called AK6, about an hour's flight north of Botswana's capital, Gaborone, became available. AK6 was near a famously productive diamond mine called Orapa. De Beers had discovered

AK6 in the seventies but had not developed it, concluding that it would cost too much money to extract too few diamonds. When Lucara's team examined samples that had been extracted in the seventies, they noticed evidence that many diamonds had been damaged in the sampling process, and that De Beers's statistical models had discounted these larger, broken stones.

William Lamb, a lean, energetic South African, had been appointed the general manager of Lucara. Lamb and his team believed that the less sophisticated processing methods of the seventies had crushed any stone larger than ten millimetres in width. Lucara's geologists knew from studying the AK6 samples that larger diamonds existed in the deposit, and they wondered

whether the mine might be a good investment after all.

"Our view was that there was value in AK6 that De Beers were definitely *not* seeing," Lamb told me.

Lucara bid on the site, and Lundin provided a bank guarantee to De Beers for fifty million dollars, capturing some seventy per cent of the stake. Soon afterward, Lucara bought the remaining stake by acquiring De Beers's London-based junior venture partner, African Diamonds. Lucara now owned AK6, having spent a little more than seventy million dollars—not much more than the cost of the most expensive diamond later found at the site, which became the Karowe mine. Recently, I asked Eira Thomas whether she knew then that her company had bought an asset that would yield extraordinary stones. She told me, "No, we got lucky. We knew there was upside. We didn't know *how much* upside."

Gren Thomas dismissed the idea that Lucara had been lucky. His daughter, he said, was both a workaholic and a rigorous scientist. Although it was "beyond anyone's dreams" that the big-

gest diamond since the Cullinan would be discovered at Karowe, he felt that Eira had an unteachable talent for discovery. "She has a good smell for things that are liable to be successful," Gren told me. "She has a good nose, as they say in our business."

The Karowe mine is now a giant hole, about twenty-six hundred feet in diameter and about five hundred feet deep. Lucara plans to continue open-pit mining for seven more years, until a depth of thirteen hundred feet is reached, at which point it will make no economic sense to go further with this method. (To make such assessments, the firm uses "strategic mine-planning software" with the pleasing name Whittle.) Recently, Lucara conducted a feasibility study, which suggested that after the open-pit process is finished it would be economical to dig an underground shaft that would descend another thirteen hundred feet. Karowe will likely produce diamonds until 2040.

When I visited Karowe, on an oven-hot day in September, I peered over the

precipice. A dozen giant diggers and transport trucks at the bottom of the cavity looked comically small. The gray ore of the kimberlite pipes was easily distinguishable from the reddish-brown earth around it: ink blots on old paper. On one side of the mine was the "north lobe" of kimberlite; on the other was the south lobe. Around eight hundred people work at Karowe, the vast majority of them Botswanans. Lucara is considered a good employer, but it runs a tight ship. In 2017, noting inefficiencies in its production cycle, it fired many of its managers and replaced its mining contractor.

One of Lucara's geologists, Thebe Tlhaodi—who is known as Fresh, on account of his babylike rolls of fat—pointed to a small area, in the south lobe, from which most of the largest diamonds had emerged.

"That is our G-spot," Fresh told me.

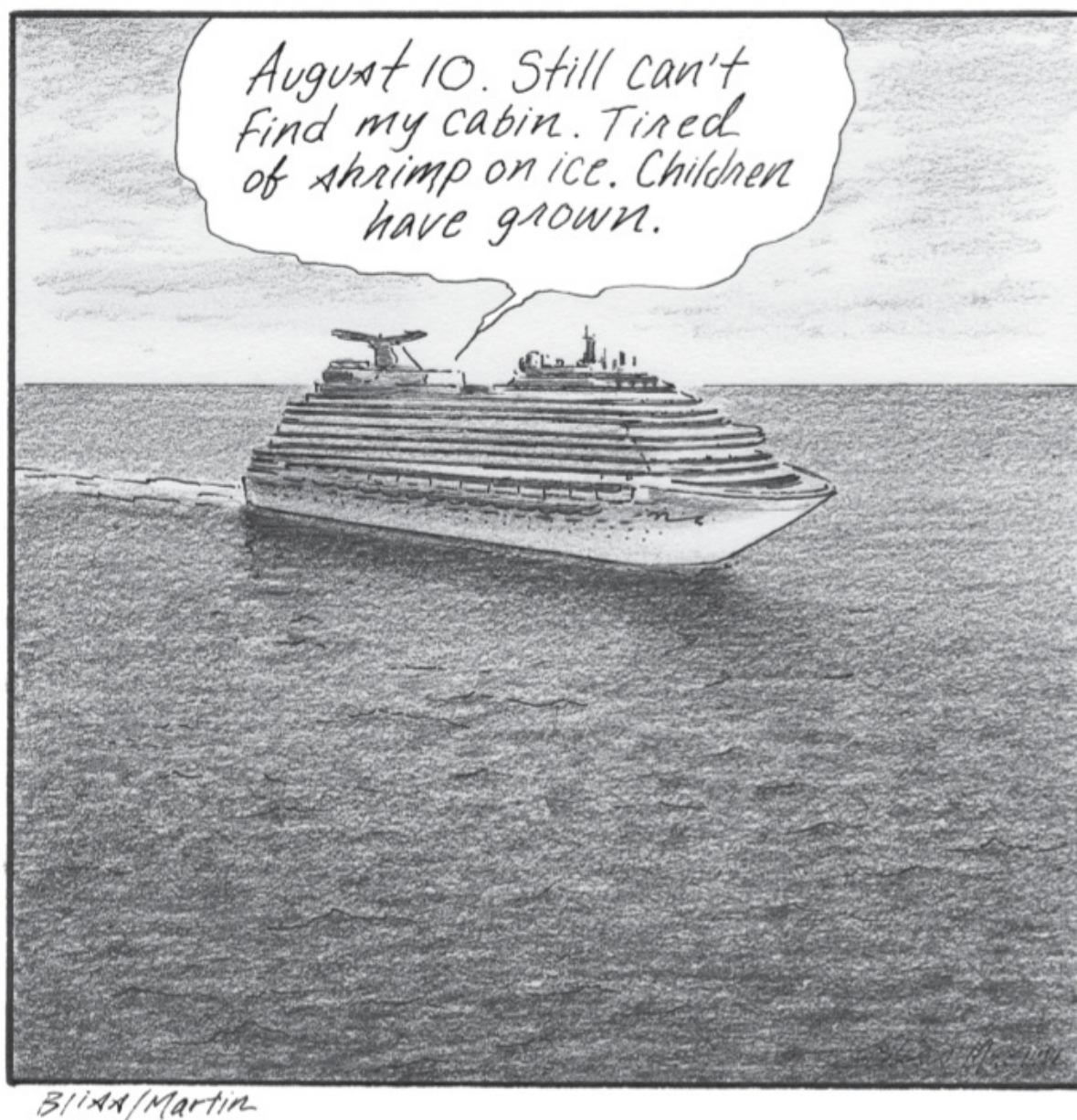
"Sweet spot!" a colleague cried out, laughing. "*Sweet spot*, Fresh."

The mine wall was a series of corkscrew ridges, along which transport trucks ferried diamond-bearing ore to the top. The ore was then driven half a mile or so, to Karowe's diamond-processing plant—a system of conveyor belts, funnels, and chutes that led the ore to a sorting warehouse, like a steam-punk amusement-park ride.

The ore at Karowe is low grade, meaning that there is a small percentage of diamonds in every ton of material. (Karowe produces about fifteen carats per hundred tons of ore; Diavik, the Canadian mine, produces as much as a thousand carats.) Recovering a diamond at Karowe is tantamount to finding a needle in a haystack, in a barn full of other haystacks without needles.

The diamond-recovery process is necessarily destructive: an engineer who works with Lucara described it as "turning big rocks into little rocks." The mined ore is crushed several times before it reaches the sorting rooms. Diamonds have a reputation for being tough, but if you put them under enough pressure they will break, along fissure lines. Perversely, the same process that is required to find a profitable yield of diamonds can lead to the most valuable stones—the big ones—being pulverized.

Early in Karowe's operation, Lucara's geologists realized that the mine con-



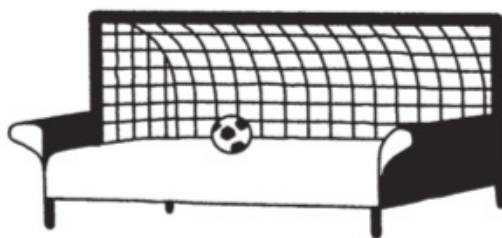
tained exceptional stones. Many of the diamonds were large, and most of them were Type IIa—“ultra-deep” stones that originated more than three billion years ago, sometimes at six hundred kilometres or more beneath the surface. These diamonds, which are often beautiful and clear, with irregular shapes, present challenges to discovery. Among other things, they do not fluoresce, because they are low in nitrogen. Many traditional plants use X-ray luminescence to sort diamonds in the final stages of processing. That approach would not work well at Karowe.

Lucara decided to innovate. Karowe was built with an autogenous mill—rocks were placed in a rotating drum, where they cascaded into one another. This was a less violent method of breaking stones than the technique commonly used in southern Africa, in which steel rods smash rocks into smaller pieces. By 2013, Eira Thomas had persuaded a Canadian geologist named John Armstrong, who had worked with her at Stornoway, to join Lucara. Armstrong has a nimble intelligence. When he came to the firm, it had already recovered a few large diamonds. Statistical models convinced him that Karowe had many more such stones—and his team began to explore ways to recover them without damaging them. One option that Armstrong considered was X-ray transmission technology, known as XRT, which scans objects for a specific atomic signature, rather than for a physical characteristic, such as luminescence or weight. The engineer who works with Lucara told me that an XRT machine functions much “like an airport baggage scanner.”

XRT had flourished in the recycling industry, and some mines used it as a secondary recovery method, but it had never been used as a principal method. Lucara’s management quickly saw its potential. If the technology worked well enough, the mine’s larger diamonds would not be crushed so many times before they were sorted. The scanner could pick out anything with a carbon signature. At the end of a conveyor belt, a puff of air would propel a rough diamond into a separate chute, where it would travel down to a sorting room.

In 2014, Lucara signed a deal with

a firm called TOMRA, a leader in garbage-recycling technologies but a small player in the mining field. The arrangement required an investment of between fifty and sixty million dollars by Lucara. Not only would Lucara need to buy half a dozen XRT machines from TOMRA; it would also have to reconfigure its whole diamond-processing plant around them. The financial risk was significant. Geoffrey Madderson, the diamond-segment manager at TOMRA,



signed the deal, and he told me that, for Lucara, “the whole future of its business was at stake.”

While six conventional XRT machines were being installed at Karowe, a pilot machine was put in place. This device, Lucara hoped, would recover diamonds weighing three hundred carats or more—rare items, even at Karowe. In the device’s first few months of operation, it did not isolate a single diamond, and tensions among Lucara’s management team rose. “It was a roaring success, apart from the fact that we didn’t recover any diamonds,” Madderson recalled. “People said that it was a farce.”

But Madderson and Armstrong noted that the pilot XRT had been processing only ore from the north lobe, which was not rich in large diamonds. Lucara kept faith with the technology, and in April, 2015, the whole plant switched over to the XRTs. On the first weekend of using the new system, the scanners found a two-hundred-and-sixty-nine-carat stone. It later sold for about twenty million dollars. More exceptional stones followed. Within six weeks, the investment in the scanners had been repaid. Then, in November, 2015, the XRT machines puffed their air jets onto the Lesedi La Rona. A day later, Lucara found an ice-white, eight-hundred-and-thirteen-carat diamond, now known as the Constellation. In the next few days, a string of other “specials” unspooled

along the conveyor belts of Karowe’s sorting rooms. In aggregate, these rough diamonds fetched more than a hundred million dollars in sales.

Eira Thomas was ecstatic: the firm’s creative approach had been validated. By her reckoning, De Beers would not have recovered such large stones from Karowe, even if it had developed the mine. The consortium’s processes were too crude. (De Beers declined to comment for this article.) Thomas told me, “One of the things that I love about our team—and this stems from the experience of Diavik—is that, as Canadians, we didn’t have a big *history* of exploring for diamonds. And that was the biggest advantage that we had.”

Madderson told me that, for the diamond industry, Lucara’s discovery of the Lesedi La Rona was momentous—an instant in which a new technology changes a business forever, leaving behind those who fail to adapt. He was on a work trip in Russia when he heard the news. “That day was a fucking good day,” he said.

A large rough diamond presents both an opportunity and a risk. Two years after the Cullinan was discovered in South Africa, it remained unsold. Eventually, in 1907, the government of Transvaal, in South Africa, decided to buy the stone, for about twenty million dollars in today’s money, and present it as a gift to Edward VII. The King selected two Dutch brothers, Joseph and Abraham Asscher, the most renowned diamond cutters of their day, to turn the stone into jewels. A Royal Navy ship was publicly instructed to transport the Cullinan to the brothers’ studio, in Amsterdam. In fact, the ship was guarding an empty box, as a decoy. Abraham Asscher collected the stone from the Colonial Office, in London, and then travelled back to Amsterdam, by ferry and by train, with the diamond in his pocket. (Security arrangements for large diamonds have remained rudimentary: in the nineteen-fifties, the New York jeweller Harry Winston received big stones by registered first-class mail; the Lesedi La Rona was carried “on the person” of unguarded commercial-airline passengers.)

Joseph Asscher, the more skillful brother, was given the task of cleaving

the stone. A stone that large needed to be split several times—a single polished diamond made from the Cullinan would have been unwearable. Splitting the Cullinan, however, was dangerous: a saw might bend halfway through a cut. Cleaving seemed to be the only option. According to Ian Balfour’s description of the event, in his 1968 book, “Famous Diamonds,” the Asschers practiced, with oversized tools, on models of the Cullinan made from glass and wax. Then a groove was cut into the top of the diamond. On February 10, 1908, Joseph Asscher placed a cleavage knife in the groove and struck the knife with a hammer. The knife broke, but the diamond did not.

Asscher made a second attempt, according to Balfour, “with beads of sweat on his face, in tense silence, stretched almost to breaking point.” The diamond split cleanly into two pieces. Eventually, the Cullinan was cleaved into nine stones. The Asschers’ favored diamond polisher, Henri Koe, and two of his colleagues worked fourteen-hour days for eight months to finish the stones, using fifteenth-century technology—principally, a scaife, or polishing wheel. The Cullinan collection is considered nearly perfect. On completing the job, Koe had a nervous breakdown. He was sent to South Africa to recuperate.

The technology of diamond cutting has since improved. Lasers now make incisions—although polishers still use scaifes. There are thousands of cutting houses, not only in the traditional European centers of the trade but also in India, the Middle East, and China. Yet significant financial risks remain, and few diamantaires have sufficient experience to consider buying and polishing a big stone. Some of these experts work directly for the most prestigious retailers: Graff, Chopard, Tiffany, and so on. Other buyers act as intermediaries with small rare-diamond firms.

Rough diamonds are normally bought at tenders—invitation-only auctions, where clients are invited to view the stone for a few hours and then decide how much to bid. Within half a day, a prospective purchaser is asked to imagine the potential outcome of cutting a stone across various planes, in order to maximize its value. Once a stone has been bought, software can help with

VERDICTS

Advisory Note

Since the Middle Ages, animals have been put on trial for violating the supreme, metaphorical, social, and human order (themselves, incidentally, understood and consciously laid out, if not as a pure reproduction of metaphysical order then as its purest possible reflection). They recognized the conscious (what, you think dogs are stupid? they’re smarter than some of us) or half-conscious (given each and every animal species belonging to an empowered communal soul) assumption of responsibility for the representation of, at the very least, the forces of light or darkness.

As a reflection of the fundamental world-organizing foundations of not only human existence but all of existence, these judicial proceedings were and, at times, served as the only guarantee of a person’s belonging not only to his earthly but also his world-building, world-founding energy and activity. Sometimes these were the only defense against the invasion of the destructive forces of entropy.

* * *

The Bear, for negligent performance of duty, shall be sentenced to two years probation with deduction of fifty per cent of salary at his place of permanent employment; who objects to what? No one and to nothing.

The Hare, for petty theft, shall be sentenced to administrative discipline at his place of permanent residence; who objects to what? No one and to nothing.

The Dog, for hooliganism, shall be sentenced to one year of imprisonment, but, since he has been given a good reference from his place of work, this shall be changed to fifteen days and public service, get it! You don’t get it? You get it, all right!

The Cat, for the systematic violation of public order and antisocial behavior, shall be sentenced to exile at a distance of a hundred kilometres—and no objections! What do you have to object to?

The Wolf, for large-scale embezzlement, shall be sentenced to twenty-five years, or no, to be shot would be better, no, it’s still more fair to say twenty-five years with confiscation of property—you think that’s harsh? No, not really! It can’t be done any other way.

The Rat, for antisocial behavior and insulting accepted norms and the political system, shall be sentenced to five years of hard labor, followed by a ten-year suspension of civil rights! Too little? But our judicial system is not punitive! It is humanist and instructional! We aren’t fascists, after all.

such geometric considerations. But the calculations made at a tender must be made by eye alone.

This fall, I met Oded Mansori, a manufacturer and distributor of rare diamonds. Mansori has worked in Antwerp for more than two decades; before that, he was based in Tel Aviv. He is as thin as a blade, with wide-set hazel eyes and flecks of gray in his hair and beard, and he moves with the meticulousness of someone who spends

his days around tiny objects of enormous value. The first time I met him, it was Rosh Hashanah, and the synagogue near the Antwerp diamond bourse was thronged. Very few businesses in the diamond quarter were open. But Mansori invited me into his office, which was off an austere whitewashed corridor, in a heavily secured building.

He was in an expansive mood. Over coffee, I asked him what, precisely, he did for a living. “We are dream-mak-

The Wild Boar, for a disagreeable appearance, shall be sentenced to death by being eaten—and rightly so! Though what good will it do! What, like you do things differently!

The Bird, for treason, shall be sentenced to death and the confiscation of property, to teach others to not do it.

The Echidna, for an antihuman appearance and over-all nastiness, shall be sentenced to be shot with subsequent rehabilitation, so that there will be some order, after all, and high justice will triumph.

The Elephant, for its huge size, which is an assault on human honor and dignity, shall be crossed off the list of existing beings, and its ongoing existence shall be considered an anomaly and a phantom.

For economic, moral, political, and behavioral crimes, the polecat, fox, squirrel, badger, chipmunk, vole, jay, lark, raven and crow, deer and badger, kangaroo and its joeys, whale and shark, pike, swan and crab, and all their ilk shall be sentenced to various terms of punishment in various places, but with a strictly legal and individual approach to each specific case, such that no indiscriminate levelling and wholesale depersonalization take place.

The Cockroach shall simply be sentenced to be shot; this needs no explanation.

The Lion shall be sentenced to public humiliation and degradation, since it is clear that the king of animals, nature, and everything else is man.

Rivers shall be sentenced to be redirected in all possible directions, as a result of which they shall run shallow and dry up—which is only fair.

The Sun shall be sentenced to exposure and public repentance, with consequent removal from the lists of remembrance and glorification of anything beginning with the words: Long live! So it must be.

Decisions for all the remaining cases are being prepared, and the sentences will be announced as they are decided within a reasonable period of time. None will be exempt.

—Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007)

(Translated, from the Russian, by Simon Schuchat with Ainsley Morse.)

ers!” Mansori told me. This kind of language is apparently endemic to the trade. In 1954, Harry Winston told Lillian Ross, of this magazine, “I love the diamond business. It’s a Cinderella world. It has everything! People! Drama! Romance! Precious stones! Speculation! Excitement! What more could you want?”

Mansori showed me a pair of fifty-carat pear-shaped diamonds, recently made by his firm. He estimated that the pair would sell for between twenty

and twenty-five million dollars. Each diamond sat snugly in the palm of my hand. One of them had been cut from a stone mined at Karowe; the other came from a stone mined in Lesotho. Mansori explained that he had seen the potential for a pair of diamonds sourced from two mines: together, they were more than twice as valuable as single, polished gems. The diamonds were beguilingly beautiful. Examining them with a loupe felt like walking through a fun house of mirrors.

“There’s no software that can solve everything,” Mansori said. “In the end, it’s the human who has to decide.”

Cutting a diamond, he explained, is not merely a question of geometry. Certain types of stone can change color during the polishing process. Other stones contain faults, or “inclusions,” that need to be worked around. Growth lines in the diamond—markers of different stages of crystal formation within a stone—must be considered; if you leave a line at the surface, it cannot be polished away. All decisions are irreversible: a cut diamond cannot be uncut.

Mansori does not polish stones himself. He employs specialists for that task, just as the Asschers used Henri Koe. Mansori told me that, very occasionally, the task was so highly pressured that his cutters worked only two days a week. Such experts also took months-long holidays between jobs. The cutters, in Mansori’s opinion, are not artisans; they are artists.

Adding to the complexity of the process is the subjective nature of diamond pricing. Every rough diamond is subtly different. Many luxury commodities, such as gold, have a market value per weight. A rough diamond’s worth is determined not only by its carats but also by its color and clarity. (Gemological societies have various scales for rating a diamond’s clarity, from flawless to heavily included.) Although guidelines exist for diamond prices, they are not rigid.

In a nearby office, I visited Philip Hoymans, the urbane director of Bonas Group, an Antwerp broker that conducts tenders for Lucara. Hoymans told me that the subjective, fast-moving nature of the diamond business can upset vendors, especially when they imagined a price wildly different from the final bid. It is also possible for buyers to feel that, in the helter-skelter of a tender’s deadline, they overpaid.

The diamond market is opaque, but it is also wise. Hoymans told me, “If the market bids, and you’re not happy, maybe it’s *you* who got it wrong.”

Lucara has not only rethought diamond processing; it has disrupted the market itself. Traditionally, a mining firm tenders its rough diamonds and walks away with a check. But

Lucara has been reticent to sell its largest stones in this way. After the company discovered the Constellation, in 2015, it asked prospective bidders to submit proposals for how they might cut and polish the stone, in what is known as a selective tender. Lucara also retained a small financial interest in the Constellation, so that the firm could reap profits once the stone was made into jewels.

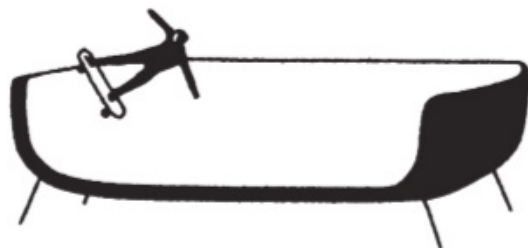
The strategy worked. In May, 2016, a Dubai-based firm called Nemesis, in partnership with a Swiss jeweller, paid Lucara \$63.1 million for the diamond—or \$77,613 per carat. It was the highest price ever paid for a rough diamond. Nemesis recently unveiled eight polished stones taken from the Constellation. The collection, as yet unsold, includes a three-hundred-and-thirteen-carat emerald-cut diamond, known as Constellation I, which is the largest completely colorless diamond ever polished. In November, 2017, a hundred-and-sixty-three-carat diamond, internally flawless and emerald-cut, was sold, at Christie's, for more than thirty-three million dollars. François Curiel, a jewelry expert at the auction house, expects that the price for Constellation I could exceed seventy million dollars.

The Lesedi La Rona's sale proved much more controversial. In 2016, Lucara instructed Sotheby's in London to sell the rough diamond at an open auction. Jewelry is often sold at auction houses, but nobody had ever sold a large rough diamond that way. William Lamb, then the C.E.O. of Lucara—he is now a consultant—told me that the firm wanted to see if there was a broader audience for a stone that was “literally a piece of art,” not to mention the first diamond of more than a thousand carats discovered in a century. Lamb did not want to limit himself to the traditional diamantaire market. He could imagine a wealthy private collector buying a rough diamond and keeping it as an investment, or as an *objet*.

Lucara's strategy irked people in the diamond trade, because it bypassed them. Hoymans, the Antwerp broker, believes that the decision to take the Lesedi La Rona to auction was a mistake, and perhaps a political one. “It is difficult to reach out to a group of peo-

ple that don't have the expertise to look at diamonds,” he told me. “With exceptional stones, it's best to stick to your business-to-business environment.”

Graff, the London jeweller, often buys rare and large stones, and its eighty-one-year-old owner, Laurence Graff, is considered a bellwether for the industry. According to several sources, Graff was particularly vexed by Lucara's decision to take the Lesedi La Rona to Sotheby's. Lamb told me that Graff's



irritation was amplified by the fact that his company had been outbid by the Dubai firm on the Constellation. Graff denies that he was upset, and told me, by e-mail, that he had passed on the Constellation. “We inspected the Constellation,” he wrote. “The rough lacked life and we were not confident that it would produce top quality diamonds.” Graff admitted that he had found Lucara's decision to take the Lesedi La Rona to auction unusual. “This industry has decades of established traditions and processes,” he said.

When the Lesedi La Rona went on display at Sotheby's, it was advertised as a likely “D color” stone. The Gemological Institute of America has a ranking system for grading the hue of diamonds, and the scale ranges from D, for colorless, to Z, for light yellow or brown. Lamb and others at Lucara felt that several diamantaires, including Graff, were vocally dismissive of the Lesedi La Rona's quality. (Graff denies this.) There was a rumor that the stone might actually be an inferior E color. It was possible for the rumor to take hold only because the stone was too large to fit in a normal scanner. By the time of the sale, Lamb believed that the old diamond world had turned against Lucara's stone.

Graff, in his e-mail, acknowledged that he had doubts about the Lesedi La Rona. “I knew it was a very, very special diamond,” he explained, add-

ing, “Until this analysis stage is complete, we can never be 100% certain of a diamond's properties.” He went on, “With a rough stone as large as the Lesedi La Rona, you can never be entirely sure exactly how it will polish and what it will yield, and there is always great risk.”

Lucara put a reserve price of seventy million dollars on the Lesedi La Rona. If the price-per-carat range of the Constellation was reached, the stone would sell for eighty-six million dollars. Privately, some at Lucara thought that the record-breaking nature of the diamond might allow it to fetch a hundred million, or more. Sotheby's evidently shared this view. The structure of the auctioneer's arrangement with Lucara meant that it would make very little commission on the diamond until the price reached a hundred million dollars; once that threshold was crossed, Sotheby's would receive a substantial payment.

Eira Thomas and her father travelled to London for the Sotheby's auction, as did Lukas Lundin and William Lamb. Representatives from Graff and its principal manufacturer, Johnny Kneller, sat two rows behind the Lucara party. In the end, the highest bidder offered sixty-one million dollars—well below the reserve price. Graff did not bid. The stone went unsold. After the auction, Lamb recalls, Kneller and others from Graff descended on him “like sharks on a piece of meat,” saying, “We need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” Lamb replied.

The Lucara group went to dinner, in Mayfair, but did not drink the champagne that had been put on ice. Lundin remained confident that Lucara would find a buyer for its diamond, but Lamb was furious. When I asked him if there had been a campaign to insure that the auction would end in failure, Lamb told me that this was “absolutely correct,” adding, “The diamond industry did not want us to sell that stone to someone else.”

In the weeks that followed, Lamb attempted to find a private buyer for the Lesedi La Rona. So many people viewed it that some senior figures at Lucara wondered whether the stone's mystique had been punctured. In the diamantaire world, the phenomenon is

known as “burning the stone.” Eventually, in 2017, Lamb got a verbal commitment from a potential client to buy the diamond, for sixty million dollars, but no contract was signed, and Lucara’s board grew impatient. Meanwhile, Graff visited Lundin on his yacht, where he bought the Lesedi La Rona, for fifty-three million dollars. Lamb described the sale as “a bargain” for Graff. Its more significant function was to reestablish the power of the old diamond world. Graff has since polished the stone into various extraordinary jewels, including a D-color three-hundred-and-two-carat emerald-cut diamond. The reservations about the stone’s color, apparently, have not been borne out.

“Laurence played the game of chess perfectly,” Eira Thomas told me. “We didn’t know we were even *playing* chess.”

Lucara’s management team decided to take the botched auction as an occasion to learn something new. Recently, Thomas launched a digital sales platform, called Clara, which allows rough diamonds to be sold individually to retailers. (To insure that financial transactions are secure, the platform uses blockchain technology.) The platform works on the basis that every diamond has a unique shape and color, which means that it is possible to create a digital signature for each stone, and to detail its provenance. If successful, Clara will pose a threat to the old diamond world, because suppliers can reach buyers without an intermediary. The platform is growing fast, although there are no signs yet that it will supplant the traditional tendering process. Catherine McLeod-Seltzer, the co-founder of Lucara, told me that you can draw a line directly from the Sotheby’s disappointment to the creation of Clara. “Somewhere in the subconscious of Eira, that was the seed,” McLeod-Seltzer said.

Last April, when the Sewelô diamond was discovered, Eira Thomas was driving her daughters through rural British Columbia to see a gold-mining project run by her brother, Gareth. Thomas’s life is peripatetic and, by her own admission, sometimes chaotic. She recently divorced her husband, a Canadian artist whom she married in 2007, and their two girls, who are eleven

and nine, currently live with her. Not long ago, she moved from Vancouver to London, where she knows almost nobody, to cut down on travel, and to improve her work-life balance. She inspires enough loyalty at Lucara that several members of her senior team uprooted their lives to follow her to England. Thomas told me that she often brings her daughters with her on work trips—to the Yukon, or to Botswana—just as her father took her exploring as a child. She says that the girls are becoming as independent and adaptable as she is.

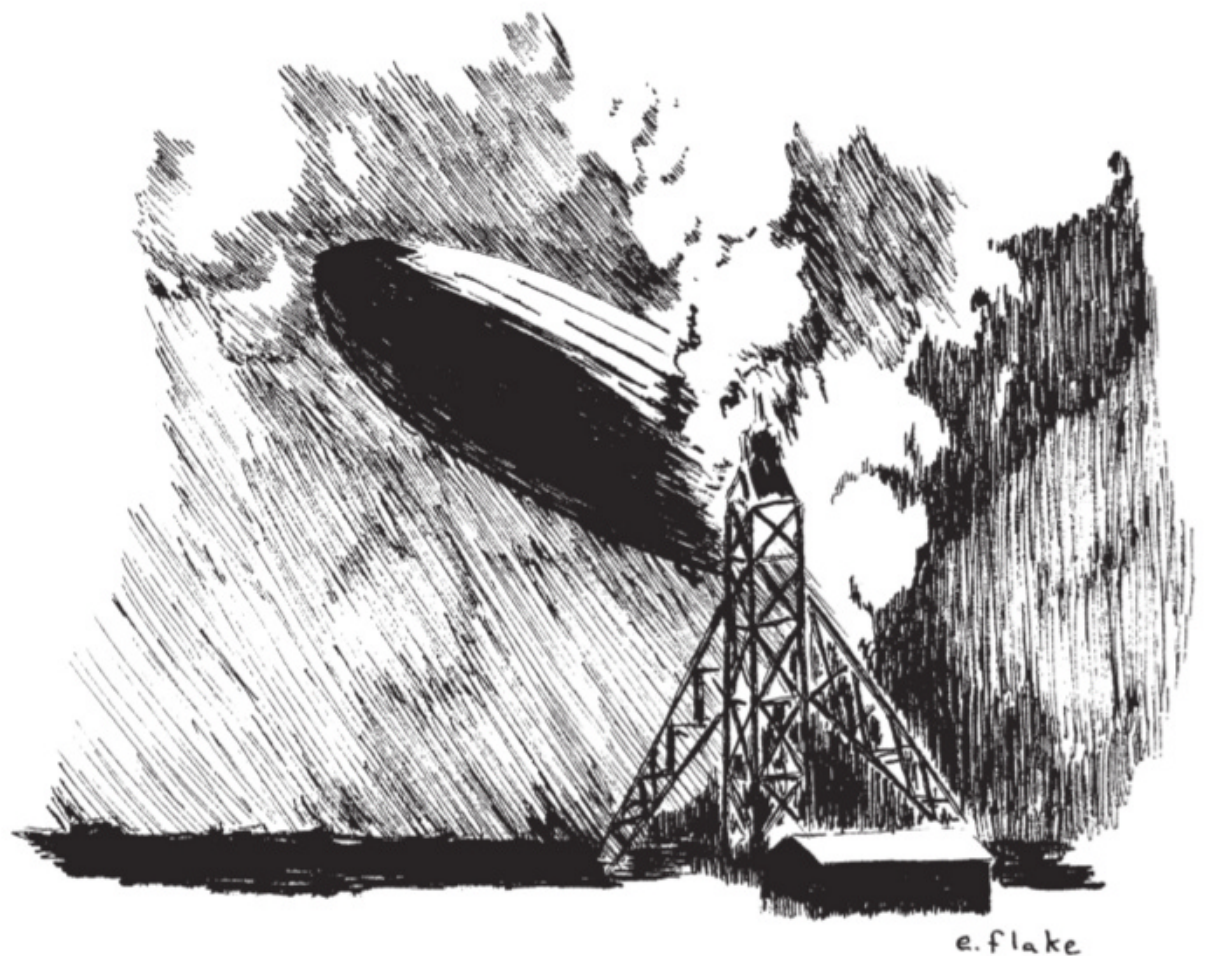
“I’m never going to win Mother of the Year,” Thomas told me recently, over a long, convivial lunch. She flashed a pity-free smile. “But they get experiences other children won’t get, and they’re starting to appreciate that.”

Thomas had no cell-phone reception when Naseem Lahri, Lucara Botswana’s managing director, tried to share the news of the Sewelô find. Hours later, Thomas and the girls got hungry, and they stopped at the Little Creek Grill, in the small town of Princeton, for lunch. The restaurant had reception, and Thomas’s phone was suddenly inundated with images of the diamond. She was initially unimpressed. “The stone looked like an avocado,” Thomas told me.

Eventually, she became more excited, and it is now her favorite stone. “It’s an enigma,” Thomas told me. “It’s not as pretty as the Lesedi or the Constellation. But, to me, it’s more valuable.”

The diamond would not fare well at a traditional tender, Thomas explained, because it was impossible to see exactly what might be inside the stone until “windows”—polished panes—had been cut into it. (Black diamond is usually much less valuable than white diamond.) She estimated that the sales value of the Sewelô at tender might have been anything from two to twenty-five million dollars, but she was not interested in selling the diamond that way. She wanted to use the sale and the manufacture of the Sewelô to draw attention to wider issues, not least the relationship of the diamond industry to the nation of Botswana.

Many African countries suffer from what is known as the “resource curse,” in which natural riches do not benefit the population, because of corruption and malfeasance. The Democratic Republic of Congo is perhaps the most egregious example of this phenomenon. The country is bountifully endowed with precious minerals,



“Oh, the #humanity!”



"No plans set in stone yet, but I'll probably spend some time getting on my wife's last nerve, maybe hyperfocus on the lawn."

including diamonds, but for decades it has been criminally mismanaged and riven by armed conflict. The citizens of the D.R.C. are some of the poorest on earth.

Botswana's story is different. It's a small, landlocked country of 2.3 million people, much of which is covered by desert. Since the nineteen-seventies, when diamonds started to be mined in significant quantities, the Botswanan government has exacted exorbitant taxes and royalties from diamond producers. The government also holds an equity stake in De Beers's ventures in the country, and its deal with the world's largest diamond conglomerate is so good that it's scarcely believable: eighty-four per cent of the consortium's profits stay in Botswana. Lucara's deal is less extreme, because it owns the Karowe mine outright, but in 2016, the year it sold the Constellation, the firm paid the Bo-

tswanan government eighty-five million dollars in taxes, and nearly thirty million in royalties, on profits of about a hundred and eighty-five million.

Hundreds of thousands of Botswanans have been brought out of poverty by the government's diamond windfall. At independence, in 1966, more than half the population lived below the poverty line; that figure is now sixteen per cent. The government uses diamond royalties to fund infrastructure, health care, and education, including advanced degrees; the most promising students can even receive aid to pursue study overseas. Keith Jefferis, an economist and a former deputy governor of the Bank of Botswana, told me that Botswana has its problems—high unemployment, an overreliance on the diamond trade—but that the upward trajectory of the country's economy has been vertigi-

nous. "The contribution of diamonds has been immense," he said. "It's really underpinned the transformation of what was a very poor country to an upper-middle-income country."

Lucara's contribution to Botswana's economy should only increase. When I met John Armstrong, the Lucara geologist, in Antwerp, he showed me predictive models on his laptop, which outlined the likelihood of finding more stones at Karowe that exceed a thousand carats. In Armstrong's calculation, it was eminently possible for diamonds weighing more than two thousand carats to be found there. I asked him if his models predicted that Lucara would find a stone even bigger than the Cullinan. "There's a low probability," Armstrong said. "But the possibility *exists*."

For six months in 2019, the whereabouts of the Sewelô diamond were unknown to all but a select group of Lucara employees and Oded Mansori, the Antwerp diamantaire, who kept it locked in his office. Eira Thomas did not want to repeat the mistake that the firm made with the Lesedi La Rona: burning the stone by showing it to too many people. None of Lucara's traditional customers would have a chance to see the Sewelô. When I spoke to Johnny Kneller, the Graff manufacturer, in October, he asked me, "Have *you* seen the stone?"

I had. In September, when I visited Mansori in his office, I was joined by Armstrong and Geoffrey Madderson, of TOMRA, the maker of the XRT scanners. After half an hour of conversation, Mansori retrieved the Sewelô from a safe and dramatically placed it on a mahogany table in front of us.

I was not expecting to be moved by a rock. The diamond was so large that I could not wrap my fingers around it. In most photographs, the color of its rind appears black, but in person it looked more silvery. The stone was cold—at least, until all of us had handled it, after which it felt as warm as a pebble in sunlight. It sometimes sparkled. Its planes were smooth, like marble. I now understood why Ketshidile Tlhomelang had spoken to me about its sensual pleasures. The diamond also prompted unusual thoughts. Because of its dark rind, the stone seemed to

carry its prehistoric past with it, in a way that clearer diamonds do not. It was a reminder that the Sewelô was created before the planet's atmosphere contained oxygen, when the only life-forms were single-celled organisms. In one sense, I realized, diamonds are baubles—somewhat vulgar totems of wealth. In another sense, they are vessels of deep time unlike anything else that can be found near the surface of the earth.

Mansori is a businessman, but he shared some of this sense of wonder. He told me that he was loath to do anything to the Sewelô except look at it. Rough was its pristine state. He wondered whether it might be best for the diamond to sit in a museum vitrine, unpolished. Of course, that would be untenable: Lucara has shareholders. Investors like to realize the value of their assets. Some weeks later, I discovered that, at the very moment I was holding the stone, Mansori and Thomas were engineering a bold plan for the Sewelô.

Earlier this month, Lucara and an entity co-founded by Mansori, HB Company, signed a deal with the luxury-goods giant Louis Vuitton. The Sewelô is now owned jointly: Lucara has a fifty-per-cent stake, the others twenty-five per cent each. None of the parties would confirm exactly what value had been placed on the Sewelô, but one knowledgeable person told me that the price was in the “low millions” of dollars, in part because of the uncertainties about the diamond's interior. Louis Vuitton will sell the polished gems manufactured from the stone, but, before the Sewelô is cut, it will tour the world, in order to educate people about the geological history of diamonds. Thomas also stipulated that five per cent of Louis Vuitton's net revenue from the Sewelô be channelled into corporate social-responsibility projects that Lucara runs in Botswana, specifically the funding of a large and well-appointed school that the company is building near Karowe.

The deal is unprecedented. Louis Vuitton's parent company recently bought Tiffany, but the fashion house has never itself been a serious diamond retailer. Becoming a partner in the Sewelô is designed, in part, to insure

that its entrance into the diamond sphere will be noticed. (Louis Vuitton hosted a lavish “launch party” for the Sewelô on January 21st, during Paris Fashion Week.) Lucara and HB, for their part, hope to plunder Louis Vuitton's exclusive list of rich clients. This is the first time that all three parts of the diamond supply chain—miner, manufacturer, and retailer—have agreed to work on a stone together. No other luxury-goods firms were approached; Thomas made the connection with Louis Vuitton's chief executive, Michael Burke, over lunch in Florida. There was so much secrecy surrounding the deal that Lucara's leadership team did not even use the name Louis Vuitton during their internal discussions. Their potential partner was known, instead, as Crocodile.

There was jeopardy in the arrangement, for all parties. Mansori had analyzed the rough diamond using a number of scanners, including an adapted medical machine that normally measures bone density. By December, he still had only a general idea of what lay beneath the Sewelô's black rind. Mansori believed that there might be as many as two hundred and fifty carats of white, gem-quality diamond within the Sewelô, but he couldn't be sure until he polished windows and inspected the interior.

“There will be surprises,” Mansori told me. His partner in HB, an Israeli named Shai de-Toledo, said, “This is the most speculative stone in history.”

With this deal, Lucara was once again provoking the traditional diamond business—it was bypassing Antwerp's brokers. Eira Thomas made no apologies. “There is just no way we're going to continue to transact diamonds the way we do today,” she told me. “My view is that the whole industry is going to go this direction.” Disruption seems to be the point of the Sewelô deal. Mansori told me recently that he welcomed any brickbats. The deal, he said, “will irritate each and every player in this industry—it takes the playing field and turns it upside down.”

Whatever is within the stone, Lucara and HB believe that they have reengineered the market, at least for big diamonds. In the past, manufacturers have analyzed rough diamonds, cre-

ated the best possible polished gems from them, and then attempted to find customers for those jewels. With this new arrangement, that equation was reversed. Wealthy customers will now be able to commission Louis Vuitton to carve a diamond, perhaps of their own design, from the Sewelô. Mansori's mind raced with possibilities. Maybe they would make three identical jewels for a billionaire's triplet daughters? Or, perhaps, a horse's-head diamond for the billionaire owner of a racing stable? Then again, if the client did not demand perfect color and clarity, HB could fashion the world's largest polished diamond out of the Sewelô—a jewel of a thousand carats.

In September in Antwerp, Mansori sat in his office and watched as his three guests beheld the Sewelô. From the moment the stone came out of the safe, it spent barely thirty seconds out of someone's grip. We left thumbprints on the diamond's planes. Mansori, laughing, said, “You see? It will not be put down.”

John Armstrong, the Lucara geologist, became somewhat giddy when he held the diamond. “It has heft,” he said. “*Life*.”

Finally, Mansori took the Sewelô in his bony hands, and rotated it this way and that. Since receiving the diamond, in the early summer of 2019, he had spent a considerable part of every working day staring at it. Despite his familiarity with the stone, he still seemed fascinated by its complexity. He pointed to where the black rind was thickest, where it abutted more translucent material.

“You feel nature is playing hide-and-seek with you,” Mansori said. He then turned away, for a more private inspection.

“There's great importance here,” he said, to nobody in particular. “Not value. But storytelling. Is there a regular white stone inside? I don't know. I don't think so. There might be significant white pieces inside. Significant. But value is secondary. You need to tell the story right.”

Mansori then became a little lost. He pulled out his iPhone, shone its flashlight into the diamond, and said, “There are moments when you can see right through.” ♦

MR. HAPPINESS

James Corden thinks that his job as a late-night host is to spread joy.

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN

Say you host a late-night talk show and you have Paul McCartney as a guest. He's game for anything. When Jimmy Fallon had this opportunity, in the fall of 2018, the "Tonight Show" came up with a benign prank. Tour groups at 30 Rockefeller Plaza were herded into an elevator. When the elevator doors opened, they saw a tableau of Fallon and McCartney playing Ping-Pong, or sitting in armchairs, smoking pipes. Each time, a camera would catch the elevator full of tourists gasping and screaming like teenagers in 1964. Then, before they could process what they'd seen, the doors would close. The routine, which has been watched more than four million times on YouTube, is amusing, in the vein of "Candid Camera." McCartney is used as a sight gag, an animal in a celebrity zoo, with the ordinary folks—themselves on display—gawking from outside the cage.

When James Corden booked McCartney, in June of the same year, he came up with something much more elaborate. CBS's "The Late Late Show," which Corden will have hosted for five years this March, was on location in England, where Corden is from, and devised a special edition of "Carpool Karaoke," the show's signature feature. In a typical sequence, Corden drives a Range Rover through the streets of Los Angeles with a famous musician in the passenger seat, and a dashboard camera captures the two of them singing along to the guest's hits. "Carpool Karaoke" videos are exuberant and almost guaranteed to go viral. There's a democratizing effect to seeing celebrities experience their music the way the average commuter does—belting along to the AM radio, the real world gliding by. Corden acts as a kind of Everyfan, asking his guests softball questions and cajoling them into making wacky pit stops. When Cardi B did "Carpool

Karaoke," she and Corden drove to a senior center, and she rapped for a geriatric dance class.

The McCartney edition was filmed in Liverpool. It begins with Corden and McCartney singing along to "Drive My Car," Corden honking the horn in time with each "Beep beep, beep beep, yeah!" On Penny Lane, they break into "Penny Lane." McCartney points out personal landmarks through the window: "I used to be in the choir at that church." They stop at the barbershop that inspired the first verse of "Penny Lane," where all the people that come and go stop and say hello. Crowds gather. "Last time I was around here, certainly nobody was noticing me at all," McCartney says on the street.

Back in the car, he tells Corden a story: during a stressful period in the late sixties, his mother, who had died years before, appeared to him in a dream and comforted him by saying, "Let it be." He and Corden harmonize on the anthem that resulted. Corden, choked up, recalls the first time that he heard the song, when his father and grandfather, both musicians, played it for him. "If my granddad was here right now, he'd get an absolute kick out of this," Corden says. McCartney, eyes fixed on the road, replies, "He is."

They pull up to 20 Forthlin Road, the house McCartney lived in during his teens, now a National Trust site. He shows Corden the room where he and John Lennon finished writing "She Loves You." He plays "When I'm Sixty-Four" on an old upright piano. More crowds have gathered outside, and McCartney jauntily shakes hands on the way back to the car. They drive to a pub on Hope Street where McCartney played when he was young. Corden goes in alone and stands behind the bar; he encourages a woman to choose a song on the jukebox. Suddenly, a curtain opens, and there's McCartney and

a four-piece band, playing "A Hard Day's Night." The people in the pub, young and old alike, freak out at the sight of the home-town hero. McCartney performs "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" and "Back in the U.S.S.R." Then Corden joins him for a duet of "Hey Jude." The surprise set is euphoric and inclusive: part block party, part time machine. Even McCartney seems transported. The video, which is twenty-three minutes long, has been watched on YouTube nearly fifty million times.

Corden, who is forty-one, sees his show as a delivery system for happiness. Unlike his more nihilistic contemporaries in British comedy—Ricky Gervais, Steve Coogan, Armando Iannucci—he believes that entertainers have a responsibility to combat cynicism and spread joy. "The Late Late Show" airs at twelve-thirty-five in the morning, and, although it slightly trails NBC's "Late Night with Seth Meyers" in live ratings, it produces a steady supply of viral videos. "Carpool Karaoke" has attracted such stars as Lady Gaga, Adele, Elton John, Barbra Streisand, and Michelle Obama, who, as First Lady, took a spin around the White House grounds while singing "Signed, Sealed, Delivered." The show does not view its target audience as insomniacs and stoned college students. "The policy that we came in with was: this show *launches* at twelve-thirty," Ben Winston, an executive producer, told me. "Our competition isn't whatever else is on at twelve-thirty-seven. It's what's on the next morning at breakfast. It's what's on your computer at work." Within fourteen months of the show's premiere, its YouTube channel had exceeded a billion views.

Corden was an unlikely choice for the job (aside from being white and male, as most late-night hosts still are). He made his name in British television as a co-creator and star of the BBC



Corden's friend Harry Styles says, "He's one of those guys who just wants everyone to have a good time."

sitcom “Gavin & Stacey,” but was practically unknown in America when he took over the time slot from Craig Ferguson, in 2015; David Letterman called him “that chubby guy.” His American breakthrough occurred in the 2012 Broadway production of “One Man, Two Guvnors,” an adaptation of Carlo Goldoni’s commedia-dell’arte classic “The Servant of Two Masters”—not a typical path to Hollywood. Whereas most late-night hosts are offspring of “Saturday Night Live” (Fallon, Meyers, Conan O’Brien) or “The Daily Show” (Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, Hasan Minhaj), Corden is more aligned with the English music hall, and his comedic influences include such British duos as Morecambe and Wise and the Two Ronnies. Before delivering the opening monologues on “The Late Late Show,” he had never performed standup comedy.

But, in the past five years, Corden has lodged himself in the American pop-culture landscape, both on late-night television and as a movie actor, casting himself as a happy-go-lucky showman who can liven up any party. (Not incidentally, his bouncy enthusiasm is a trait that Brits tend to think of as American.) The pop singer Harry Styles, who has vacationed with Corden in Jamaica and Mexico, told me, “He’s one of those guys who just wants ev-

eryone to have a good time.” Winston, who met Corden twenty years ago, on the set of the British series “Teachers,” recalled a cast-and-crew evening out in Bristol, at “the most depressing pub you could ever imagine.” It was karaoke night, and, without warning, Corden got up and sang Robbie Williams’s “Let Me Entertain You.” “The entire pub—people who knew him, people who didn’t know him, random locals, every single person—was up on their tables dancing, singing, joining in.”

People who dislike Corden find his eagerness to entertain more like attention-hogging, his chumminess more like smarm. He has a “please like me” air that can grate, especially when it is accompanied by song and dance—and even more so when he is swathed in digital fur, as in the recent film version of “Cats.” “I don’t *think* I think that much about being liked,” he told me in November, when I visited the Los Angeles set of “The Late Late Show,” though, he acknowledged, “sometimes I can look like a golden retriever.” He was sitting in his office, beneath a framed letter from Michelle Obama (“Thanks for the best car ride I’ve had in years”), wearing a Gucci tiger sweater and a thin beard, to minimize his jowls. A votive candle burned on his desk, incongruous in the California sunlight. “I’m a big candle man,” he explained.

(Also, Nest Fragrances supplies candles for the show’s guests, and they arrive by the boxload.)

I confessed to Corden that I had teared up when I watched the Liverpool edition of “Carpool Karaoke.” He said that on the morning of the shoot, before setting off, McCartney had told him that he didn’t want to go inside his old house. “He said, ‘I haven’t been there since I left, when I was twenty. I just feel weird about it,’” Corden recalled. “I went, ‘Paul, your only job today is to have a great time. So, if there is anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, we’re not going to do it.’” But he urged McCartney not to rule it out. They agreed that, when they pulled up to 20 Forthlin Road, McCartney would give him a look if he wanted to leave.

“When we pulled up outside, I thought, Oh, man, I wish we’d devised a code word instead, because what if he’s giving me *the look*?” They sat in the car, locking eyes. Finally, Corden asked, “Should we go in?” “Yeah,” McCartney said. “Let’s do it.”

The next morning, I met Corden at a dance studio on the Paramount lot. He was learning choreography for “The Prom,” a forthcoming Netflix movie directed by Ryan Murphy, based on the 2018 Broadway musical. Corden and Meryl Streep play clueless Broadway actors who try to boost their likability by descending on a conservative Indiana town to take up the cause of an ostracized lesbian teen. “They’re absolute narcissists,” Corden said, of his and Streep’s characters. “They think the world is Broadway. They think they are the world.”

He and a group of dancers rehearsed “The Acceptance Song,” a “We Are the World”-esque anthem that the limousine-liberal thespians perform after interrupting a monster-truck rally. Midway through, Corden’s character, a one-time Drama Desk Award winner named Barry Glickman, makes a buffoonish grand entrance. One of the dancers, who had been standing in for Corden in previous rehearsals, suggested that he do “a little swirl or something,” à la “West Side Story.” But Corden wasn’t sold—he wanted room to improvise on the day of the shoot. “My worry is



“That’s a very impressive mating dance, but you should know I’m currently in a relationship.”

we'll lock into something," he said.

The track played and Corden listened. "I wonder if he should finish in a stage split—so *deeply* inappropriate," he said, eying himself in the mirrored wall. As a physical comedian, he has a nimble gracelessness that recalls Oliver Hardy. "There are not a lot of people who are entertainers, and by that I mean people who can gather people together," Murphy told me. "That's what an entertainer does, and I think James is that." Casey Nicholaw, who directed "The Prom" on Broadway and is an executive producer of the Netflix version, arrived, and Corden proposed that, instead of parodying "West Side Story," he could freeze into a pretentious modern-dance pose, à la Martha Graham. To demonstrate, he leapt into the arms of two dancers, who spun him around horizontally. "Is that too much?" he asked.

"I love it," Nicholaw said. But Corden was still noncommittal.

After rehearsal, he drove to the "Late Late Show" offices in his Range Rover. I sat in the passenger seat, half expecting us to break into song. Instead, Corden switched on BBC Radio 1, to catch up on news of the House impeachment hearings. Corden does not use his own car for "Carpool Karaoke," but he told me that we were following the same route: "We just drive as far as you can in a straight line away from the sun and then turn around and drive back." Once, he and Adam Levine got pulled over for driving too slowly on a freeway. "Just be careful," the cop said, when he realized who it was.

On Beverly Boulevard, we drove up to the gates of Television City, where "The Late Late Show" films. Six weeks after the show's premiere, Corden said, he went out to lunch and forgot his I.D. The security guard wouldn't let him back in. "But that's me!" he said, pointing to a billboard with a giant image of his face. The guy looked up and said, "I don't see it." Corden recalled, "I was, like, We've been on for six weeks. It was quite the wake-up call."

Corden had been reluctant to take the late-night job. At the time, he was pitching a single-camera series and was also in talks to star on Broadway in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." Les Moonves, the chief

executive at CBS (who later resigned, after allegations of sexual misconduct), had seen Corden in "One Man, Two Guvnors." In a meeting with executives, Corden mentioned that the twelve-thirty slot, which Ferguson was about to give up, had never made any sense to him. "Unless you make a show that will embrace the Internet, it is pointless," he remembers telling them. "That show should feel like a party."

He claims to have been completely surprised when they then offered him the show. He declined—the initial offer, he said, was terrible—but reconsidered after CBS came back with more money. Winston, with whom he has a production company, tried to talk him out of it. "I said, 'I think you're going to get really frustrated having to be in the same place every night,'" Winston told me. But Corden had turned bullish. "He said, 'Imagine if we had a blank piece of paper every single day, and you could fill that piece of paper with anything that you wanted to, and it would be on the No. 1 network in America.'"

Corden abruptly pulled out of "Forum," closed up his newly renovated London town house, and moved with his family to Los Angeles. Not sure how long they'd be there, he and his wife rented furniture for the first six months. He and a small staff had only thirteen weeks to put the show together, but they decided that Corden's relative anonymity was a blessing. "We want to be a show that's dripping in a sort of scrappy ambition," Corden said. They knew that they needed a recurring feature, along the lines of Letterman's "Stupid Pet Tricks" or Jay Leno's "JayWalking." They remembered a 2011 sketch that Corden had done for the Comic Relief telethon in the U.K., in which Smithy, his character from "Gavin & Stacey," drives through London with George Michael singing Wham! songs. The segment had been wildly popular, and Corden, still adjusting to Los Angeles traffic culture, hit on the concept of "Carpool Karaoke."

"I've never been so sure that an idea would work," he said. "But what I didn't know is that we wouldn't be able to get anybody to do it." Everyone the bookers approached declined, until a chance encounter with a publicist from Mariah Carey's label led to their first big

get. More followed: Jennifer Hudson, Justin Bieber. After Stevie Wonder appeared in a segment, one of his greatest-hits albums jumped to the top of the U.K. iTunes charts, turning "Carpool Karaoke" into a promotional bonanza. Publicists started pitching their clients, and musicians whom the show had been chasing, such as Chris Martin, suddenly came around.

Since the 2016 election, late-night hosts have had to reexamine the role of comedy in a dystopian news cycle that seems funnier than it is. Stephen Colbert, whose show precedes Corden's—and who, upon starting that job, in 2015, had shed his patented conservative-blowhard character from "The Colbert Report"—found his footing only after Donald Trump won, and he now leads in the ratings. Rather than lean into political satire, Corden has stuck to his strengths: musical numbers, silly games, and high-concept stunts. Whereas "The Daily Show" and its descendants have repositioned comedians as public intellectuals, Corden goes for the antic mood of a variety show. The contrast with Colbert is deliberate. "Nowhere else in television would you be, like, 'From eight till nine we're going to have a hospital drama, and then from nine till ten we're going to have another hospital drama with the same diseases,'" he told me. But frivolity in the age of Trump also has its pitfalls. During the 2016 campaign, Fallon was denounced for playfully mussing Trump's hair when he came on the "Tonight Show" as a guest. Corden encountered a bit of similar backlash after the 2017 Emmy Awards, where he was photographed backstage kissing Sean Spicer on the cheek. He quickly defused the situation in his monologue the next night, joking, "Now, I know you think that's a picture of me kissing Sean Spicer, but, in the spirit of Sean Spicer: no, it isn't."

When Corden addresses politics, it's often filtered through vaudeville. The day that Trump announced his ban on transgender people in the military, Corden sang a parody of the Nat King Cole standard "L-O-V-E," retooled as "L-G-B-T." In less than six hours, the number was written, rehearsed, and staged, with a quartet of top-hatted dancers. Like Jimmy Kimmel, who, in 2017, as

lawmakers were debating the repeal of Obamacare, opened his show with an emotional speech about his infant son's heart problems, Corden is selective in his earnestness. Last September, after Bill Maher ended an episode of his HBO show with an appeal to bring back fat-shaming ("We have gone to this weird place where fat is good"), Corden delivered a pointed eight-minute rebuttal. "I've struggled my entire life trying to manage my weight, and I suck at it," he told the camera, adding, "We're not all as lucky as Bill Maher, you know? We don't all have a sense of superiority that burns thirty-five thousand calories a day."

Corden said that he and his writers had spent three days working on the speech, but held it an extra day, unsatisfied with the tone. "I was, like, We can only do this if it's funny," he said. "It can't be a rant." They added jokes, including one about fat people being tempted by pies on a windowsill. Maher, normally eager to have the last word, did not respond. "I just think it's out of touch with actual people," Corden said, of Maher's derisive attitude. "You cannot forget what most people's lives are like. You cannot forget how fucking hard it is. And maybe the only slice of joy in your life is that cheeseburger. And it's cheap. There are no chubby kids at my son's school, because it's a private school on the West Side of L.A."

Corden was speaking over dinner, his only meal that day. Although he wouldn't mind losing twenty pounds, he rarely makes an issue of his weight. (Recently, his writers came up with a list of insults of their boss for a roast segment. Corden's favorite was "You look like someone tried to carve Matt Damon out of butter.") One of his first jobs, in England, was on the soap opera "Hollyoaks," playing a college janitor. For a scene set in the character's bedroom, he was appalled to see that the set designer had decorated the walls with posters of junk food. He refused to film the scene until they were taken down. "I thought that they were just really being nasty about anyone that's overweight," he told me. "I remember saying to the guy, 'I don't know one person who would take a picture of a hot dog and a burger and stick them on the wall.'" I wondered about his character

in "Cats," the gluttonous feline Bustopher Jones, who gorges on garbage—wasn't he a walking fat joke? "Oh, but he's revelling in it," Corden said. "He's going, 'I'm the greatest! I'm big and I'm fat and I live the best life! I eat everything! It's *incredible*.'"

The formula for American late-night shows has stayed remarkably consistent for six decades. In 1954, Steve Allen began hosting a ninety-minute show on NBC called "Tonight Starring Steve Allen," which became the "Tonight Show." Although his tenure was short, it brought about such lasting innovations as the desk, the couch, and the monologue. Jack Paar, who took over in 1957, was a member of the Algonquin Round Table and imported his skill for celebrity banter. Johnny Carson took the reins in 1962 and didn't let go for thirty years. He didn't reinvent the "Tonight Show" so much as build it into a cornerstone of American culture, a monolith even in fractious times. In the late seventies, he pulled in more than seventeen million viewers a night.

Carson's Pax Romana gave way, in the early nineties, to a Cold War of Leno versus Letterman. They retained the desk, the couch, the monologue, and the celebrity chitchat, but they had sharply contrasting styles: Leno was county-fair broad and inoffensive, while Letterman was bone-dry and ironic. Leno's not-quite-departure, in 2009, kicked off another succession drama. Conan O'Brien got the "Tonight Show," but Leno stuck around, Pope Benedict-style, in the ten-o'clock slot. The resulting skirmish ended with O'Brien's premature exit (he's now on TBS) and Leno's return to the "Tonight Show," until he finally ceded it to Fallon, in 2014. At CBS, Letterman's handoff to Colbert was relatively frictionless, but by then late-night television was fragmenting into cable and online platforms, all competing for smaller slices of the pie. "The ratings have gone totally to shit," one late-night producer told me. "You're fighting over such tiny pieces of the audience that it's pretty irrelevant."

Corden has tweaked the formula ever so slightly. Instead of interviewing guests one by one, bumping them down the couch as the show unfolds, he brings them out together, for more of a din-

ner-party feeling, a format he borrowed from British chat-show hosts such as Graham Norton. The set, dotted with lampshades, resembles a homey cabaret. A few rows of audience seats are placed in front of the cameras, for extra intimacy; Corden told me that he wanted the atmosphere of a "cozy playground."

One Thursday in November, Corden arrived at the studio at 11 A.M., for Episode No. 702. The news had already thrown him a curveball: two teen-agers had been killed that morning in a school shooting in Santa Clarita. That evening's show was supposed to include a game called Flinch, in which celebrities are positioned behind a pane of glass and try to stand still as a cannon fires fruits and vegetables at them. Corden and his executive producers, Winston and Rob Crabbe, had decided to cancel it. "Not that it involves a gun in any way, but still it felt insensitive," Corden told me in his office. "I'm not sure what we're going to do." They quickly subbed in a game called Emoji News, in which audience members have to guess topical headlines spelled out in emojis.

At noon, two segment producers came in to prep Corden on that evening's guests: the weathered heartthrob Don Johnson and the millennial Indian-Canadian YouTube star Lilly Singh, who also hosts a 1:35 A.M. show on NBC. The producers, who had conducted preliminary interviews, ran through a series of questions and the tidy anecdotes they would elicit. "Don, big month coming up," Corden read from a packet. "You turn seventy. You look sensational. What's the secret?"

"Cocaine!" a producer joked. The other producer said, "Um, he no longer eats carbs, sugars, or bread."

Winston interrupted the meeting to announce that Rob Gronkowski, the former tight end for the New England Patriots, known as Gronk, would be in the audience. "Feel free to call him out or surprise him on air," he said.

"Emoji News!" someone said. "He can be one of the contestants."

Next, a gaggle of monologue writers filed in. The "mono," as the British staffers called it, had already been whittled down from about a hundred jokes to seventeen, covering political headlines (Nancy Pelosi calling the impeachment hearings "prayerful") and news of the

STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

(SUNG TO THE TUNE OF "STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT")



Strangers in the night,
We're in a Duane Reade,
'Neath fluorescent light.
What is it we need,
Close to 3 A.M., what are we doing here?



It's just me and you,
We're buying face cream,
Cheez-Its, and shampoo.
It's like a weird dream
That you can't escape—thank God they carry beer.



Picking up our meds!
We're buying Q-tips and deodorant and Peds,
And maybe rose hips,
And some vitamins and tea,
That's enough for me.
Ugh—the cashier's such a creep.
Hope tonight I'll fall asleep.



Then we left the store,
We walked back home and
Opened up our doors, got in our beds, and
It turned out all right
For strangers in the night.



R. Chast

weird (a man finding a half-smoked joint in his Popeyes chicken sandwich). Corden read through the script silently, jotting down notes, as the writers flipped the pages along with him. The Pelosi bit called for a mockup of her doing a keg stand, in contrast to her professed prayerfulness. The joke had been held over from the previous day, when Corden had asked his staff, “What’s a keg stand?” Other American concepts that have needed explaining include the electoral college and “Sabrina the Teenage Witch.”

At three o’clock, Corden walked down a hallway to the set, for rehearsal. Onstage, he stood on his mark—a sticker for West Ham United, his Premier League football club—and ran through the monologue. Afterward, the writers huddled around his desk. Corden tapped his pen, frowning. “I didn’t enjoy a lot of this,” he said, more uncomfortable than annoyed. “That’s my overwhelming feeling.” Winston suggested that a joke about Pelosi’s accusing the President of bribery (“He offered her ten thousand dollars to take it back”) needed a better setup.

“And then I thought this photo of the keg stand is not good,” Corden continued. Winston agreed—besides, they had made a similar joke about Pelosi on a previous episode. The bit was scrapped.

“Now, what about the chicken sandwich?” Winston asked.

“I hated that one,” Corden said.

“So why don’t we lose that chicken story?” Winston said. They kept another drugs-in-strange-places anecdote, about a group of wild boars that had got into a stash of cocaine in Italy. (The graphics team had whipped up an image of a boar in a “Miami Vice” suit.) The writers, undaunted, returned to their stations. “I’m going to have a drink tonight,” Corden said. “Get real fucking loose!”

“God help us,” Winston muttered.

Back in his office, Corden and his staff planned upcoming sketches, including a “Masked Singer” parody with Josh Gad and Adam Lambert. At four-twenty, he changed into his suit and sat in a dressing room, where a stylist applied hair spray. The writers gathered around in a horseshoe, and Corden read the revised monologue. Seeming pleased, he asked the stylist to spritz all the writers with Japanese seawater. Before he got up, Crabbe handed him a sheet of

paper and said, “There’s something we’d like to do in Act 6 from the desk.” It was a heartfelt statement about the Santa Clarita shooting, including a dig at “politicians without the moral courage to address gun laws.” Crabbe and Winston had distilled it from discussions they’d had with Corden throughout the day. Corden nodded and handed it back.

In the greenroom, outfitted with a Foosball table and a wall of prizes (including a gold YouTube Creator Award, for exceeding a million subscribers), Corden greeted Johnson, Singh, and the musical guest, the band Sleater-Kinney. Reggie Watts, his bandleader, had not yet arrived; he usually strolls in within ten minutes of showtime. While a warmup guy revved the crowd, Corden stood backstage and reviewed the monologue one last time, and the stylist brushed his lapel. Gronk appeared—all six and a half feet of him—and gave Corden an excited bro handshake. Then, at five o’clock, Corden walked onstage.

The show went smoothly. The Pelosi jokes landed, including a new one about how “Prayerful” sounds like the third track on a Kanye West album. Gronk interpreted an emoji headline about a Malaysian man who had got his penis stuck in a drainpipe. Don Johnson told a story about meeting Mick Jagger at Live Aid. Finally, the lights dimmed, and Corden delivered his Santa Clarita speech to a hushed audience. Back in his office, as he changed into sneak-



ers, I noted that he had just segued from impeachment jokes to a penis emoji headline to a sombre acknowledgment of a school shooting.

“And that’s just Thursday,” Corden said nonchalantly. “What a life, eh?”

Corden grew up just outside High Wycombe, England, which he describes as “a sort of shit bit between London and Oxford.” (Its main attraction is a collection of Windsor chairs.)

One evening in December, his father, Malcolm, picked me up at the train station there. A sweet, cue-ball-headed man, he recently retired as a Christian-book salesman, but he still plays clarinet in a Royal Air Force Voluntary Band; that afternoon, he’d performed at a veterans’ home. His own father, Kim Corden, was a big-band leader. Kimberley, Malcolm explained, is a family name—his grandfather was christened just after the British victory in the Siege of Kimberley, during the Second Boer War, in 1900—and extends to his son, James Kimberley Corden.

In Hazlemere, the suburb that the family has lived in since James was six, Malcolm drove me past a supermarket where his son, as a teen-age employee, “tried to purloin some of the goods.” We pulled into the Cordens’ driveway, and Malcolm took his clarinet and music stand from the trunk. In the house, his wife, Margaret, a retired social worker, was resting in an armchair. “Marg’s just had a new left knee,” Malcolm explained. The cream-colored living room was adorned with a small Christmas tree and a miniature manger scene. Malcolm brought me a cup of tea with chocolate-ginger biscuits and mince pie.

Margaret was raised as a member of the Salvation Army, which Malcolm joined when they met. James, born in 1978, was the second of three children, and the church was central to his early life. “On Sundays, everyone you know puts on a uniform, marches through the town, and sings ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers,’” Corden recalled. He later grew disillusioned: “The entire church that I went to, from what I can realize now, was full of some of the least Christian people I’ve ever come across in my life.” His parents have since left for the Church of England, despite Margaret’s rank, in the Army, of Young People’s Sergeant-Major.

As a child, Corden was “strong-willed” and “very mischievous,” his mother told me. At his younger sister’s christening, when he was four, he pulled faces while standing at the altar. “I remember turning around and looking back through my legs, and people giggling,” Corden said. “And then going back and sitting down and staring at the back of the person in front of me, thinking, Well, this is boring. Why are

we all down here? We should be up there! That was it, really. Then it was just a quest to perform in any way, anywhere I could."

His parents struggled with money—"Crumbs, we didn't have two ha'pennies to rub together!" Malcolm said—but they enrolled him in an after-school drama program. Malcolm dutifully drove him to professional auditions, but his son, who became chubby in adolescence, was never cast. After one unsuccessful audition, for "The Sound of Music," Malcolm gently told Corden that he could give up auditioning if he wanted. "I can still hear him now in the car, as we were driving out on the Westway out of London," Malcolm recalled. "He said, 'Dad, I can't. It's what I've got to do.'"

When Corden was twelve, the Royal Air Force unexpectedly summoned Malcolm to Bahrain in the first Gulf War, as an auxiliary medic. Corden was distraught. "I just couldn't fathom it, because my dad was a saxophone player in the R.A.F.," he said. "He used to play big-band jazz on the QE2, and suddenly he was in army camouflage gear." Malcolm called home every weekend, but the sound of his voice reduced Corden to tears. "I couldn't talk to him when he was away. My sisters could." His father returned after four months, having faced nothing more dangerous than practicing injections on an orange.

At school, Corden became a bawdy class clown. "As soon as I got big, I just thought, Well, I'll be the biggest target in the room. I'll be the loudest voice. I will have so much confidence that it will almost be unnerving," he said. As a teen-ager, he was obsessed with the boy band Take That and formed a series of knockoff groups, with names like *Insatiable* and *Twice Shy* ("so we could call our album 'Once Bitten'"). Determined to be an actor, he blew off school, except for drama and English; his last two years, he rarely brought pens to class. When a career counsellor advised him to have a backup plan, he pointed to classmates who were planning to study leisure and tourism and asked, "What are *they* falling back on?"

At seventeen, he was finally cast in a West End musical, "Martin Guerre," by the writers of "Les Misérables." His one line was "Roast the meats!" The



"Sign here, initial here, rassle Zeke for the keys, and you're all set."

show was an "abject disaster," he said. After a few months, he was offered a spot on the barricade in "Les Mis," but he remembers thinking, "I'm going to get stuck in the company of big musicals, and that's not the plan." Instead, he took a job at a pizza restaurant. Television gigs came, including one on "Boyz Unlimited," a short-lived series about a fictitious boy band, and a few episodes of "Hollyoaks," the soap opera. When the show offered him seventy thousand pounds a year to stay—more than anyone in his family had ever earned—he agonized. His father advised him not to accept the offer, since he clearly didn't want to do it. "I swear to God, if I had done that show I'd have been there for five years, and I'd probably be on 'Dancing with the Stars' right now," Corden said.

In 2000, he was cast on "Fat Friends," an ITV show about a slimming club, filmed in Leeds. One weekend, his girlfriend, Shelley, invited him to a wedding in Barry, a resort town in South Wales. At the party, he overheard two middle-aged men comparing themselves to cars. "I'm not a Porsche," one man argued, in a deep Welsh accent. "Of course, I'd love to be an Audi, but I'm not. I'm a Mondeo, and that's fine." Corden burst out laugh-

ing. As he watched the two families (one Welsh, one English) on the dance floor, he thought about how weddings bring together not just two people but their separate worlds: "I just felt like I was watching all of life happen."

Back in Leeds, he told a Welsh co-star named Ruth Jones about what he'd seen. "He said, 'It would be lovely to write something about a wedding where nothing really happens,'" Jones told me. At their hotel bar, they riffed on the idea as strangers came and went. "We would sort of people-watch and go, 'Oh, she would be the drunken auntie. He would be the geeky uncle,'" she said. "All we came up with was a series of vignettes, really, little bits of conversation."

They dropped the idea, and Corden auditioned for the National Theatre's production of "The History Boys," Alan Bennett's comedy set at an English grammar school. "The door flew open, and in barrelled this big guy who never stopped talking," the director, Nicholas Hytner, told me. "He later claimed he was terrified, which I'm sure was true, but he seemed to brim with confidence." Corden was cast as Boy 3, a role that Bennett promised to make more prominent in order to lure him away from a television offer. The young men in the



"Everything depends upon the red wheelbarrow."

cast, including Dominic Cooper and Russell Tovey, formed an instant camaraderie, but they were intimidated by the play's breezy references to Auden and Wittgenstein. Hytner swore the cast to a "vow of stupidity," meaning that they would all learn together.

The play was a smash, and it travelled to Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and Broadway, where it won the 2006 Tony Award for Best Play. Cooper recalled, "We'd literally roll up to the stage door, throw a tie on, and run onstage, often missing the entrance." It was all a gas, but Corden was disappointed to see his thinner castmates booking major movie auditions, while he grasped for bit parts. "I was good for playing a bubbly judge in a courtroom, or I'd be the guy who drops off a TV to Hugh Grant in a movie," Corden told me. He added, "If someone came from another planet and put on the television, you would think that people who are big or overweight don't have sex. They don't fall in love. They're *friends* of people who fall in love. They're probably not that bright, but they're a good time, and they're not as valuable as people who are really good-looking."

Realizing that he would need to create his own material, he revisited the wedding idea with Jones, and they wrote up a treatment for a one-hour TV spe-

cial. A BBC 3 executive told them that it might work better as a series, and they turned it into one, called "Gavin & Stacey." The title couple—she's from Barry, he's from Essex—would be played by skinny, telegenic actors. Corden and Jones cast themselves as the couple's wacky best friends: Smithy, a beer-swilling handyman, and Nessa, a fabulously trashy arcade attendant. "We were being realistic that neither of us is romantic-lead material," Jones told me. Yet the two characters shared a raunchy sexual bond and, eventually, a child. In one scene, they flirt over takeout from KFC:

SMITHY: Do you want that corn on the cob?

NESSA: Is that a euphemism?

SMITHY: What? No, I'm just saying, there's one corn on the cob left, and you can have it. (He looks at her lustfully.) If you want it.

NESSA: (Setting down her fried chicken.) Do you want me to have it?

"Gavin & Stacey" premiered in May, 2007, with half a million viewers, and ran for three seasons. The last episode, which aired on New Year's Day, 2010, was watched by ten million people, a sixth of the British population. Its regional humor may be lost on Americans, but the show has the soothing familiarity of Sunday dinner at the in-laws', and it made Corden a household name. Nevertheless, he felt lost. He had broken up with Shelley after nine years

and begun a volatile on-and-off relationship with Sheridan Smith, who played Smithy's sister. Feeling cool for the first time in his life, he'd go out drinking every night. The British tabloids delighted in printing photographs of him stumbling out of pubs. For a time, he lived out of his Mercedes hatchback, crashing with Cooper or drifting among one-night stands. "He thought he was Jack the Lad," his mother told me.

At the 2008 British Academy Television Awards, Corden won for best comedy performance, and "Gavin & Stacey" received the Audience Award. Accepting the latter, Corden bemoaned the fact that the show hadn't also been nominated for best comedy. The audience recoiled at his ungraciousness. The British press, which never needs an excuse to go into attack mode, painted him as an arrogant jerk, which, he admits, he was. "I started to behave like a brat that I just don't think I am," he told me. "It's so intoxicating, that first flush of fame. And I think it's even more intoxicating if you're not bred for it." Back in Hazlemere, his parents prayed for him. "You can try and say, 'Look, James, you're making a prat of yourself,' but you can only do so much," Margaret said.

At the beginning of 2009, Corden and Mathew Horne, the actor who played Gavin, launched a sketch show, "Horne & Corden," and co-starred in a comedy-horror film called "Lesbian Vampire Killers." Both were flops. Corden blames his dwindling work ethic for the failure of "Horne & Corden," which inspired the *Sun* to call him "that fat git, with a laugh like a neutered howler monkey." The entire country seemed to delight in his humbling. "Because of the characters he plays, he's like a man of the people, so people feel like they're his mates," Cooper reasoned. "So he gets horrible things written about him compared to anyone else I know, and if he doesn't respond the way Smithy would, for example, then they immediately turn on him."

At one point, Rob Brydon, who played Stacey's lovable Uncle Bryn, confronted Corden over lunch. "I said, 'Look, this is a bit awkward to say, but I'm just hearing these things about you, and you've got to know that the way

you behave has an effect on people,” Brydon recalled. Corden’s sisters also intervened, according to his mother: “They would come in and say to James, ‘Don’t be a dickhead.’” Chastened, Corden began seeing a therapist. At his first session, he said, “I used to be a better person than this.” He tried to figure out why he felt so empty. He began forcing himself to stay home at night and eat TV dinners. “The absolute biggest thing I had to learn to do,” he said, “was just stay in and be comfortable on my own.”

On the morning of December 23rd, Corden stepped out of a car in London and headed into a BBC building. A paparazzo snapped his picture and wished him a happy Christmas. “And you,” Corden replied merrily. “See you, mate!”

Inside, he greeted the cast of “Gavin & Stacey,” with whom he had filmed a reunion special after a decade-long hiatus, to air on Christmas Day. It would be comforting fare for a Britain riven by politics; in the home-for-the-holidays plot, Brexit and Boris Johnson were conspicuously absent. As the cast waited to do a radio interview, Corden hummed “Sleigh Ride” and chatted with Brydon by the coffee machine. The day before, he had taken his nine-year-old son, Max McCartney Kimberley Corden, to a soccer match, then strolled around shops in London, listening to holiday music. “Have you heard the Kacey Musgraves song ‘Christmas Makes Me Cry’?” he asked Brydon. “I’m fifty-four,” Brydon deadpanned.

The actors filed into a studio, where Corden and Jones sat side by side. “James Corden, he’s gone off to Hollywood—has he changed?” the host asked. There was an uncertain pause, and then everyone laughed.

“I think that silence was filled with love,” Jones said.

After 2009, Corden’s public image didn’t rebound overnight. His bad reputation was compounded by another awards-show incident, in which he sparred onstage with Patrick Stewart. (They’ve since reconciled.) In 2011, a *Guardian* profile summed up the “consensus” view: that Corden was “arrogant and loud, his humour laddish and dated, that he has an unappealing, thes-

py air of entitlement.” Corden and Cooper had moved into a sparsely furnished bachelor pad in Primrose Hill, where they subsisted on junk food. Cooper recalled, “I remember him coming home one night, and I was just eating baked beans with a ladle out of the can.” One evening, Cooper lured him out to a Bulgari charity event and introduced him to a friend, Julia Carey, who worked for Save the Children. Corden was thrilled to learn that she had never watched “Gavin & Stacey.” Now his wife of eight years, she still hasn’t watched an episode.

Although his personal life was becoming more stable, it was unclear how much patience England had left for Corden. He continued to make appearances as Smithy, his gregarious alter ego, including in the George Michael sketch that spawned “Carpool Karaoke.” A boost finally came from Nicholas Hytner, at the National Theatre, who devised “One Man, Two Guvnors” as a vehicle for Corden. “So he went to a few parties, got hammered a couple of times, shot his mouth off, and made a terrible movie,” Hytner told me. “Serial killers get an easier ride than he did for ‘Lesbian Vampire Killers.’ But he was still the guy who made ‘Gavin & Stacey,’ and I needed something purely enjoyable for a season that was otherwise wall-to-wall Ibsen and Jacobean tragedy.”

“One Man, Two Guvnors,” which reset Goldoni’s 1746 comedy in nineteen-sixties Brighton, provided Corden



with a slapstick tour de force. Within moments of his entrance, he throws a peanut in the air, tumbles backward on an armchair, leaps up, and reveals the peanut on his tongue, proclaiming, “I got it!” Later, after his character becomes frazzled by his split allegiances to his two bosses, he gets into a one-man schizoid brawl—slapping, sucker punching, and choking himself, before

finally slamming his face with a garbage-can lid. There was no way not to root for him. The *Telegraph* called the show “absolute bliss.” A year later, it went to Broadway, where Corden had none of the baggage that weighed him down in England. In the *Times*, Ben Brantley called him “a comic star in Britain who seems poised to become one here in short order.” For Corden, it was a new lease on comedy, a chance for a do-over. “My God, I’ve never been so aware of the great time I’m having as I was when I was doing that show,” he told me. One night, he pulled Donald Trump onstage from the audience, to assist with a heavy trunk. “I fired him,” Corden recalled proudly. “At one point, I spanked him.”

Corden was recounting the incident at his house in London’s Belsize Park, as he packed for a Christmas vacation with his wife and three children. That morning, at the BBC interview, he had inadvertently made headlines when he revealed that he had not yet seen “Cats” and joked, “I’ve heard it’s terrible.” The film had been out for three days and was being ridiculed as an epic fiasco—a new generation’s “Xanadu.” “I can’t imagine I’ll see it,” Corden told me, shoving a hoodie into a suitcase. But he was good-humored. “It’s important to say I had the best time making it,” he added. “At some point, you have to go, How am I going to judge my own experience? Am I only going to have enjoyed something if it was successful?”

Last summer, Corden extended his contract at “The Late Late Show” for two more years, but he will not stay forever. He wants his children to know London better, and he dreams of reprising “One Man, Two Guvnors.” At his L.A. office one afternoon, he had shown me a new book of Garry Shandling’s diaries, edited by Judd Apatow. On one page, from 1990, Shandling, whose hit sitcom “It’s Garry Shandling’s Show” had not brought him contentment, had scrawled a note to himself: “Don’t identify yourself with your career. You are you. You are not your job. Also, this summer, work on your stand-up.”

“It’s weird, innit?” Corden said, looking up. “That’s why the jury’s out for me on how healthy it is to do these shows for that long. I’m not sure it’s healthy to have a standing ovation every day.” ♦

Things We Worried About When I Was Ten

DAVID RABE

WILLIAM GOTTLIEB / CORBIS / GETTY

High on the list was trying not to have the older boys decide to de-pants you and then run your pants up the flagpole, leaving you in your underwear, and maybe bloodied if you'd struggled—not that it helped, because they were bigger and stronger—and your pants flapping way up against the sky over the schoolyard. They mostly did this to Freddy Bird—nobody knew why, but it happened a lot. It was best to get away from him when they started to get into that mood—their let's-de-pants-somebody mood. *Oh, there's Freddy Bird.* You could see them thinking it. You had to slip sideways, not in an obvious way but as if you were drifting for no real reason, or maybe the wind was shoving you and you weren't really paying attention, and, most important, you did not want to meet eyes with them, not one of them. Because they could change their mind in a flash if they noticed you, as they would if you met their eyes, and then they'd think, *Oh, look, there's Danny Matz, let's de-pants him,* and before you knew it you'd be trying to get your pants down from high up on the flagpole while everybody laughed, especially Freddy Bird.

Meeting eyes was, generally speaking, worrisome. It could lead anywhere. I'd been on the Kidnickers' porch with the big boys when they were tormenting Devin Sleverding—pushing him and, you know, spitting on him and not letting him off the porch when he tried to go. Fencing him in. And I felt kind of sorry for Devin, but I didn't let it show, and I made sure that I stayed on the big boys' side of the invisible line that separated them from Devin, who was crying and snorting and looking like a trapped pig, which he was, in a sense, and waving his hands around in that girly way he had, his wrists all fluttery and floppy, which he should have just stopped doing, because that was how he'd got into trouble with the big boys to begin with. (That was another thing we worried about, a sort of worry inside a worry: along with not wanting to meet anybody's eyes, we had to make sure that we never started waving our hands around like girls, the way Devin Sleverding did.)

So the older boys had formed a circle around him, and, if he tried to break out, they'd push him back into the middle of the ring, and, if he just stood there,

hoping they'd get tired or bored and go play baseball or something, well, then one of them would jump at him and shove him so hard that he staggered over into the boys on the other side of the circle, who would shove him back in the direction he'd come from. That was what was happening when our eyes met. I was trying to be part of the circle and to look like I belonged with the big boys and thought he deserved it, waving his hands like a girl. Just stop it, I thought. His snot-covered, puffy red face looked shocked and terribly disappointed, as if seeing me act that way was the last straw, as if he'd expected something more from me. And I don't know where Devin got the stick—this hunk of wood covered in slivers which had probably been left on the Kidnickers' porch after somebody built something—but he had it and he hit me over the head. I saw stars, staticky, racing stars no bigger than mouse turds. Blood squirted out of my head, and I fell to my knees, and, while everybody was distracted, Devin made his break. I was crying and crawling, and one of the big boys said, "You better go home." "O.K.," I said, and left a blood trail spattering the sidewalk where I walked and alongside the apartment building where I lived and on just about every one of the steps I climbed to our door, which entered into the kitchen, where my mom, when she saw me, screamed. I had to have stitches.

Another thing I worried about was how to make sure that I never had to box Sharon Weber again. It was my dad's idea. We'd gone down to Red and Ginger Weber's apartment, which was on the ground floor of our two-story, four-apartment building. I was supposed to box Ron Weber, who was a year older than me, but he wasn't home, so Red offered his daughter, Sharon, as a substitute, and my dad said sure. Nobody checked with me, and I didn't know what to say anyway—so there I was, facing off against Sharon, who was a year younger than me, but about as tall. She hit me square in the nose, a surprise blow, and I just stood there.

"C'mon, Dan," my dad said. "Show her what you got." I wanted to. But I was frozen. I didn't know what I could do—where to hit her. She was a girl. I couldn't hit her in the face, because she

was pretty and, being a girl, needed to be pretty, and I couldn't hit her in the stomach, because that was where her baby machinery was, and I didn't want to damage that; I couldn't hit her above her stomach, either, because her chest wasn't a boy's chest—she had breasts, and they were important, too, to babies and in other ways that I didn't understand but had heard about. So I stood there, getting pounded, ducking as best I could, but not too much, because I didn't want to appear cowardly, afraid of a girl, and covering up, not too effectively, for the same reason, while Sharon whaled away on me.

"Dan, c'mon, now," my dad said. "What are you doing? Give her a good one."

I couldn't see my dad, because my eyes were all watery and blurry—not with tears, just water.

I guess it had dawned on Sharon that nothing was coming back at her, so she was windmilling me and side-arming, prancing around and really winding up. My dad said, "Goddammit, Dan! Give her a smack, for God's sake." Red was gloating and chattering to Sharon, as if she needed coaching to finish me off. "Use your left. Set him up." My dad was red-faced, his mouth and eyes squeezed into this painful grimace, the way they'd been when I spilled boiling soup in his lap. He could barely look at me, like it really hurt to look at me.

He grabbed me then, jerked me out the door. Once we were outside, he left me standing at the bottom of the stairs while he stomped up to our apartment. I ran after him and got to our part of the long second-floor porch we shared with the Stoner family just in time to see him bang the door shut. I heard him inside saying, "Goddammit to hell. What is wrong with that kid?"

"What happened?" my mom asked.

"I'm sick of it, you know."

"Sick of what?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Never mind," he said. "Goddammit to hell."

"Sick of what? At least tell me that."

"Why bother?"

"Because I'm asking. That ought to be enough."

"Him and you, O.K.?"

"Me?" she said. "Me?"

I heard another door slam. When I opened the apartment door to peek in, I saw that the door to the bathroom, which was alongside the kitchen, was closed.

My mother was wearing a house-dress that I'd seen a million times. It buttoned down the front and never had the bottom button buttoned. She had an apron on and a pot holder around the handle of a pot in her hand. Everything smelled of fish. She looked at me standing in the doorway with the Webers' boxing gloves on. "What happened?" she asked.

"I was supposed to box Ron Weber, because Dad thought I could beat him, even though he's older, but he wasn't home, so Sharon—"

"Wait, wait. Stop, stop. What more do I have to put up with?" She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the kitchen.

"What happened? What happened? What happened?" she said too many times. "Carl," she shouted at the bathroom door. "What happened?"

"I'm on the crapper," he said.

"Oh, my God." She walked like a sad, dizzy person to the table, where she sat down real slow, the way a person does when sliding into freezing or scalding-hot water. She put her chin in her hands, but her head was too heavy and it sank to the tabletop, where she closed her eyes. I stood for a moment, looking down at my hands in the boxing gloves, wondering how I was going to get out

of them. What if I had to pee? How could I get my zipper down and my weenie out? I went into the living room, which was only a few steps away, because the apartment was really small. I sat on the couch. I wished I could go up into the attic. It wasn't very big and had a low, slanted roof, but it felt far away from everything, with all these random objects lying there, as if history had left them behind. One of them was Dobbins, my rocking horse, who had big white scary eyes full of warnings and mysteries to solve, if he could ever get through to me. But the only way up to the attic was through the bathroom, which was off limits at the moment because my dad was in there on the crapper. I worked on the laces of the gloves with my teeth, trying to tug them loose enough that I could clamp the gloves between my knees and pull my hands out, and I made some progress, but not enough. So I gave up. I sat for a while and then I lay down on the couch.

Another thing we worried about was that, if it rained and it was night—not late, because then we had to be in bed, but dark already, and wet, the way a good heavy rain left things—and our parents wouldn't let us go out, or wouldn't let us have a flashlight because we'd run the batteries down, then other kids would get all the night crawlers that came up and slithered in the wet grass. We worried that they would all be snatched up by the kids whose parents

weren't home, or who had their own flashlights. It was strange to me that night crawlers came up at all, because when they were under the dirt they were hidden and safe. Maybe, though, if they stayed down there after a heavy rain they would drown. I didn't know and couldn't ask them. The main thing was that they weren't regular worms but night crawlers, big and fat, with shiny, see-through skin, and we could catch them and put them in a can with coffee grounds and then use them as bait or sell them to men who were going fishing but hadn't had time to go out and catch some themselves.

When our parents did let us go, we raced out our doors and, in my case, down the stairs, then walked around sneakily, searching the grass with a flashlight, the beam moving slowly, like the searchlight in a prison movie when prisoners are trying to escape. When the light struck a night crawler, we had to be quick, because they were very fast and they tried to squirm back into the holes they'd come out of, or were part-way out of, and we had to pinch them against the ground with our fingers and then pull them out slowly, being careful not to break them in half. Because they somehow resisted—they hung on to their holes without any hands. We could feel the fear in them as they tried to fight back, so tiny compared with us, though we were only kids, and, when we got them out, the way they twisted and writhed about seemed like silent screaming. It was odd, though, how much they loved the dirt. We all knew that there were awful things down there. Germs. Maggots. You could even suffocate if dirt fell on you in a mudslide. We almost felt as if we were saving the night crawlers, dragging them out and feeding them to fish. It was impossible to figure it all out.

Another thing we worried about was having to move. What if we had to move? It happened every now and then to people we knew. Their families moved and they had to go with them. A big truck showed up, and men in uniforms took all the things out of the house and put them into the truck. It had happened to the Ballingers, for example. "We're moving," Ronnie said. "Gotta move," his younger brother, Max,



"I'm not complaining. I'm just saying I wish I had brought my gloves."

said. And, the next thing we knew, the trucks were there and the men in and out and then the Ballingers were gone. Every one of them. The house was empty. We could sneak into their yard and peek in the windows and see the big, scary emptiness, so empty it hurt. And then other people, complete strangers, showed up and went in and started living there, and it was as if the Ballingers had never been there.

Or Jesus. We all worried about Jesus. I know I did. What did he think of me? Did he, in fact, think of me? At Mass, I took the Host into my mouth, and the priest said that it was Jesus, and the nuns also said that it was Jesus, in this little slip of bread, this wafer that melted on my tongue. You weren't supposed to chew it or swallow it whole, so you waited for it to melt and spread out holiness. Hands folded, head bowed, eyes closed until you had to see where you were going to get back to your pew, and there was Mary Catherine Michener entering her pew right in front of you, her eyes downcast, a handkerchief on top of her head because she'd forgotten her hat, and her breasts, which had come out of nowhere, it seemed, and stuck out as if they were taking her somewhere, were big, as if to balance the curve of her rear end, which was sticking out in the opposite direction. Did Jesus know? He had to, didn't he, melting as he was in my mouth, trying to fill me with piety and goodness while I had this weird feeling about Mary Catherine Michener, who was only a year or two older than me and whom I'd known when she didn't have pointy breasts and a rounded butt, but now she did, and, seeing them, I thought about them, and the next thought was of confession. Or of being an occasion of sin. I did not want to be an occasion of sin for the girls in my class, who could go to Hell if they saw me with my shirt off, according to Sister Mary Irma. And so confession again. Father Paul listening on the other side of the wicker window, or Father Thomas, sighing and sad and bored.

Being made an "example of" by Sister Mary Luke, the principal, was another nerve-racking thing that could happen. You could be an example of almost anything, but, whatever it was, you would be a kind of stand-in for ev-

erybody who'd committed some serious offense, and so the punishment would be bad enough to make everybody stop doing it, whatever it was.

Or getting sat on by Sister Conrad. That shouldn't have been a worry, but it was. And, though it may sound outlandish, we'd all seen it happen to Jackie Rand. But, then, almost everything happened to Jackie Rand. Which might have offered a degree of insurance against its ever happening to us, since



so much that happened to Jackie didn't happen to anyone else, and yet the fact that it had happened to anyone, even Jackie, and we'd all seen it, was worrisome. Sister Conrad, for no reason we could understand, had been facing the big pull-down map and trying to drill into our heads the geographic placement of France, Germany, and the British Isles. This gave Jackie the chance he needed to poke Basil Mellencamp in the back with his pencil, making him squirm and whisper, "Stop it, Jackie." But Jackie didn't stop, and he was having so much fun that he didn't notice Sister Conrad turning to look at him.

"Jackie!" she barked. Startled and maybe even scared, he rocked back in his desk as far as he could to get away from Basil, and aimed his most innocent expression at Sister Conrad. "Stand up," she told him, "and tell us what you think you are doing."

He looked us over, as if wondering if she'd represented our interest correctly, then he turned his attention to his desk, lifting the lid to peek inside.

"Did you hear me? I told you to stand up, Jackie Rand."

He nodded to acknowledge that he'd heard her, and, shrugging in his special way, which we all knew represented his particular form of stubborn confusion, he scratched his head.

Sister Conrad shot toward him. She was round and short, not unlike Jackie, though he was less round and at least

a foot shorter. All of us pivoted to watch, ducking if we were too close to the black-and-white storm that Sister Conrad had become, rosary beads rattling, silver cross flashing and clanking. She grabbed Jackie by the arm and he yelped, pulling free. She snatched at his ear, but he sprang into the aisle on the opposite side of his desk, knocking into Judy Carberger, who cowered one row over. Sister Conrad lunged, and Basil, who was between them, hunched like a soldier fearing death in a movie where bombs fell everywhere. "You're going to the principal's office!" she shrieked.

We all knew what that meant—it was one step worse than being made an example of. Stinging rulers waited to smack upturned palms, or, if we failed to hold steady and flipped our palms over in search of relief, the punishment found our knuckles with a different, even worse kind of pain.

Sister Conrad and Jackie both bolted for the door. Somehow—though we all marvelled at the impossibility of it—Sister Conrad got there first. Jackie had been slowed by the terrible burden of defying authority, which could make anyone sluggish.

"I want to go home," he said. "I want to go home."

The irony of this wish, given what we knew of Jackie's home, shocked us as much as everything else that was going on.

Jackie leaned toward the door as if the moment were normal, and he hoped for permission, but needed to go. Sister Conrad stayed put, blocking the way. He reached around her for the door-knob and she shoved him. I may have been the only person to see a weird hopelessness fill his eyes at that point. I was his friend, perhaps his only friend, so it was fitting that I saw it. And then he lunged at her and grabbed her. We gasped to see them going sideways and smashing against the blackboard. Erasers, chalk sticks, and chalk dust exploded. Almost every boy in the room had battled Jackie at one point or another, so we knew what Sister Conrad was up against. We gaped, watching her hug him crazily. Her glasses flew off. Jackie shouted about going home as he fell over backward. She came with him, crashing down on top of him. They wrestled, and she squirmed into a sitting position right on his stomach, where

she bounced several times. The white cardboard thing around her head had sprung loose, the edge sticking out, the whole black hood so crooked that it half covered her face. Jackie screamed and wailed under her, as she bounced and shouted for help and Basil ran to get Sister Mary Luke.

Getting into a fight with Jackie Rand was another thing we worried about. Though it was less of a worry for me than for most. Jackie and I lived cat-cornered from each other across Jefferson Avenue, which was a narrow street, not fancy like a real avenue. Jackie lived in a house, while I was in an apartment. He was rough and angry and mean, it was true—a bully. But not to me. I knew how to handle him. I would talk soothingly to him, as if he were a stray dog. I could even pull him off his victims. His body had a sweaty, gooey sensation of unhappy fat. Under him, a boy would beg for mercy, but Jackie, alone in his rage, would be far from the regular world. When I pulled him off, he would continue to flail, at war with ghosts, until, through his hate-filled little eyes, something soft peered out, and, if it was me that he saw, he might sputter some burning explanation and then run home.

As a group, we condemned him, called him names: “Bully! Pig eyes! Fatso!” The beaten boy would screech, “Pick on somebody your own size, you fat slob!” Others would add, “Lard ass! Fatty-Fatty Two-by-Four!”

The fact that Jackie’s mother had died when he was four explained his pouty lips and the hurt in his eyes, I thought. Jackie’s father seemed to view him as a kind of commodity he’d purchased one night while drunk. The man would whack him at the drop of a hat. This was even before Jackie’s father had failed at business and had to sell the corner grocery store, and before he remarried, hoping for happiness but, according to everybody, making everything worse. Jackie’s stepmom, May, came with her own set of jabs and prods that Jackie had to learn to dodge, along with his father’s anger.

All of us were slapped around. Our dads were laborers who worked with their hands. Some built machines; others tore machines apart. Some dug up the earth; others repaired automobiles

or hammered houses into shape. Many slaughtered cows and pigs at the meat-packing company. Living as they did, they relied on their hands, and they used them. Our overworked mothers were also sharp-tempered and as quick with a slap as they were with their fits of coddling. And, after our parents and the nuns were done, we spent a lot of time beating one another up.

Still, Jackie’s dad was uncommon. He seemed to mistake Jackie for someone he had a grudge against in a bar. But then, as our parents told us, Jackie was “hard to handle.” He would “try the patience of a saint,” and his dad was “quick-triggered” and hardly happy in his second marriage.

As Jackie and I walked around the block, or sat in a foxhole we’d dug on the hill and covered with sumac, these were among the mysteries that we tried to solve.

“Too bad your dad lost his store,” I told him.

“He loved my real mom,” Jackie said, looking up at the light falling through the leaves.

“May is nice.”

“I know she is. She’s real nice.”

“He loves you, Jackie.”

“Sure.”

“He just doesn’t know how to show it. You gotta try not to make him mad.”

“I make everybody mad.”

“But he’s quick-tempered.”

“I’d try the patience of a saint.”

More than once, I went home from time spent with Jackie to stare in wonder and gratitude at my living mother and my dad, half asleep in his big chair, listening to a baseball game. Sometimes in church I would pray for Jackie, so that he could have as good a life as I did.

In daylight, we did our best, but then there was the time spent in bed at night. It was there that I began to suspect that, while there was much that I knew I worried about, there was more that I worried about without actually knowing what it was that worried me—or even that I was worrying—as I slept. The things with Mr. Stink and Georgie Baxter weren’t exactly in this category, but they were close.

Mr. Stink was a kind of hobo, who built a shack on the hill behind our

apartment building, and he had that name because he stank. We kids were told to stay away from him and we did. He interested me, though, and I looked at him when I could, and sometimes I saw him looking at us. We all saw him walking on the gravel road between the hill and our houses, lugging bags of junk, on the way to his shack.

Then one night I was in our apartment, doing my homework, while Dad was listening to baseball, and my mom was rocking my baby sister in her lap and trying to talk my dad into listening to something else, when this clanking started. It went *clank-clank-clank* and stopped. Then *clank-clank-clank* again. “What the hell now?” my dad griped. It went on and on, and Dad couldn’t figure out what it was, and Mom couldn’t, either. It started at about nine and went on till ten or later, and Dad was on his way to complain to the landlord, whose house was next door, when he decided instead to talk to Agnes Rath, who lived in the apartment under us. It turned out that Agnes was scared sick. When Dad knocked, she turned on her porch light and peeked out between her curtains, and, seeing that it was him, she opened her door and told him that Mr. Stink had been peeping in her window. She’d seen him and, not knowing what to do, had turned off all her lights and crawled into the kitchen. Lying on the floor, she’d banged on the pipes under her sink as a signal. So that was the clanking. Agnes Rath’s signal. Well, a few nights later, a group of men ran through our yard and my dad ran with them, and then, not too long after that, fire leaped up on the hill around the spot where Mr. Stink had his shack, and nobody ever saw him again.

Then Georgie Baxter got married, and moved into an apartment on the ground floor of the building next door to Jackie. Georgie and his new wife, who everybody said was “a real looker,” couldn’t afford a long honeymoon. They got married on a Saturday, but, because Georgie had to work on Monday, they came back to their apartment Sunday night, and what awaited them was a shivaree. People came from all directions, men, women, and kids, everybody carrying metal buckets or pots and beating on them with spoons to

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The sun eats away at the earth, or the earth eats away
at itself and burning up,

I sip at punch.
So well practiced at this
living. I have a way of seeing

things as they are: it's history
that's done this to me.
It's the year I'm told

my body will turn rotten,
my money talks but not enough,
I feel my body turn
against me.

Some days I want to spit
me out, the whole mess of me,
but mostly I am good

and quiet.
How much silence buys me

mercy, how much
silence covers all the lives it takes to make me.

In the event of every day and its newness
of disaster, find me sunning on the rooftop, please
don't ask anything of me.

If I could be anything
I would be the wind,

if I could be nothing
I would be.

—*Camille Rankine*

make a huge loud racket. Jackie and I were doing it like everybody else, beating away on pots with big spoons, though we had no idea why, all of us together creating this clamor as we closed in on the apartment building with Georgie and his new bride inside. I stood with my pot and my spoon, beating away, whooping and feeling scared by the crazy noise we were making and the wild look in all the grownups' eyes, as if they were stealing or breaking something. I wished more than anything that I knew why we were doing what we were doing.

About a week later, Jackie came and

told me to hurry. At his house, he took me upstairs. It was Saturday, and he put his finger to his lips as he pulled me to the window and we looked down at Georgie and his new wife, in their bed without any clothes on, rolling and wrestling, and she looked like pudding or butter. After a while, Jackie fell on the floor kind of moaning, like he had the time we went to the Orpheum Theatre to see the movie "Dracula." Perched way up high in the third balcony, we'd watched the ghost ship land in the mists with everyone dead, and, when Dracula swirled his cape and lay back in his coffin, Jackie got so scared he hid on

the floor. I looked down at him now, and then back at the window, and the pudding woman saw me. She glanced up, and, though I ducked as fast as I could, she caught me looking in her window. If she told, what would happen? Would I get run out of town like Mr. Stink? If she told Georgie, or started banging on water pipes to alert people, would they come swarming and pounding on pots to surround me? My fate was in the hands of Georgie Baxter's wife. What could be worse? Because she knew that I knew that under her clothes she was all pudding and bubbles. It was a horrible worry, but I didn't tell anyone, not even Jackie. That worry was mine alone, and it was maybe the worst worry, the worry to end all worries.

But then Jackie wandered into his kitchen one Saturday to find his stepmother, May, stuffing hunks of beef into the meat grinder. Her head swayed to music from the radio on the shelf above her, and her eyes were busy with something distant. Jackie had gone into the kitchen because he was thirsty, so he stood on a chair to get a glass from the cupboard above the sink. He filled the glass to the brim from the faucet and drank every drop. The chair made a little squeal as he slid it back under the kitchen table. That was when Step-mom May screamed. Seeing the black hole of her mouth strung with saliva, Jackie was certain he had committed some unspeakable crime. She raised a bloody mess toward him, her eyes icy and dead, and he knew that she was about to hurl a half-ground hunk of beef at him. When instead she attacked the radio, yanking out the plug and circling her arm with the cord, he thought that she had gone insane. It was only when she wailed "My thumb!" that he understood. A hand crank powered the meat grinder, moving a gear that worked the teeth inside its cast-iron belly. With her right hand turning the crank, she'd used her left to stuff the meat into the mouthlike opening on top of the apparatus. Her thumb had gone in too deep, and she'd failed to notice, or noticed only when she'd ground her thumb up with the beef. She ran out the door, the radio tied to her arm, rattling along behind her, and left him standing alone, blood dotting the worn-out ducks in



"I don't know any scary stories, so I thought we could just watch a bunch of YouTube clips of robots performing human jobs."

the uneven linoleum, and the trickle of hope that had survived the loss of his real mom draining away.

When Jackie told me what had happened, as he did within minutes, it was as if I'd been there to see it, and I felt his deep, deep worry. It played on us like the spooky music in "Dracula." It was strange and haunting and beyond anything we could explain, with our poor grasp of nouns and verbs. And yet we knew that Jackie needed to try. A downstairs door banged, and Jackie ran from where we stood on my porch, around the corner of the bannister, taking the steps two at a time until he landed in the yard.

Finding Agnes Rath, who nervously peered over her grocery bag at Jackie, he made his report: "STEPMOM MAY CUT HER THUMB OFF IN THE MEAT GRINDER!"

Suppertime was near, so people were coming and going. Suddenly, he heard Red Weber approaching, followed by his wife. Racing up to one and then the other, Jackie backtracked in the di-

rection of their door so he could announce his dreadful news before they trampled him in their haste to get home: "STEPMOM MAY CUT HER THUMB OFF IN THE MEAT GRINDER!"

Henry Stoner, who lived beside us on the second floor, came around the corner, lunch bucket under his arm, and Jackie retreated up the stairs, never missing a step; he took corners, eluded rails. "STUCK IT IN AND TURNED THE CRANK!" he shrieked. "STUCK IT IN AND TURNED THE CRANK!" Mrs. Stoner was home already, her shift at the plant having ended earlier than her husband's. She came out onto the porch and, in a gush of neighborly concern, prodded Jackie for more details.

"How is she?" Mrs. Stoner asked.

"JUST GROUND IT UP!"

"Did you see it?"

But he could not budge from his point. The thing against which he had crashed clutched at him, like the tentacles of that monster squid we had all seen in "Wake of the Red Witch." Now Jackie was being dragged down through inky confusion

to some deep, lightless doom. If he was ever to discover the cause of the terror endangering him and me and everyone he knew, as he believed, and I did, too, the search for an answer had to begin with what he'd seen. "JUST STUCK IT IN! AND TURNED THE CRANK, MRS. STONER! JUST GROUND IT UP!"

"Can we do something for you, Jackie?"

Though he had time to look at her, he had time for nothing more. Mr. Hogan, who lived on the gravel road behind our house and who used our back yard as a shortcut home every night, was crossing. Jackie hurtled down the stairs and jumped in front of Mr. Hogan, who was fleshy and soft and smelled of furniture polish. Startled, Mr. Hogan took a step back. Before him stood a deranged-looking Jackie Rand. "JUST STUCK IT IN AND GROUND IT UP!" he yelled.

"What?"

"STEPMOM MAY CUT HER THUMB OFF IN THE MEAT GRINDER! STEPMOM MAY CUT HER THUMB OFF IN THE MEAT GRINDER!"

"What?"

"BLOOD!" he shrieked. "STUCK IT IN AND GROUND IT OFF! BLOOD! BLOOD!"

Over the next hour, the four families in our building worked their way toward supper. Last-minute shopping was needed, and errands were run. Butter was borrowed from the second floor by the first floor, an onion traded for a potato. The odor of Spam mixed with beef, sauerkraut, wieners, and hash, while boiling potatoes sent out their steamy scent to mingle with that of corn and string beans, peas, coffee, baked potatoes, and pie. All to the accompaniment of Jackie's "BLOOD!" and "STEPMOM MAY!"

My mother, looking down over the bannister, said to my dad, "He looks so sad."

"Not to me."

"You don't think he looks sad?"

"Looks crazy, if you ask me. Nuttier than a pet coon, not that he doesn't always."

"Don't say that. Why would you say such a thing?"

My father went inside, leaving my mother alone. I felt invisible, perfectly

forgotten, standing in the corner of the porch watching my mother witness Jackie's second encounter with Red Weber, who had returned from somewhere. "STEPMOM MAY! STUCK IT IN, MR. WEBER! CUT IT OFF! BLOOD! TURNED THE CRANK! STUCK IT IN!"

Annoyed now, he brushed Jackie aside and snapped, "You told me! Now go home. Go home!"

Without a second's hesitation, my mother called down to invite Jackie up for dinner.

"STEPMOM MAY," he said as he came in our door. "TURNED THE CRANK!" he addressed my dad. "BLOOD!" he delivered as he took a seat. And, glowering at my baby sister in her high chair sucking milk from a bottle, he said, "STEPMOM MAY CUT HER THUMB OFF IN THE MEAT GRINDER!"

"Am I supposed to have my goddam supper with this fool and his tune?" my dad asked.

"Can't we talk about something else?" my mother said to Jackie.

Outside, a door slammed. Jackie could not rest. He bobbed in what might have been a bow. "Thanks for inviting me to dinner. It was real good." He was gone, not having taken a bite, the screen door croaking on its hinges.

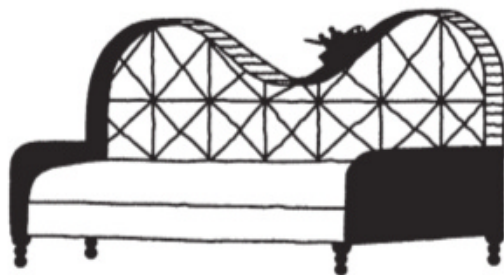
"Goddammit to hell," my dad said. "What does a person have to do to have his supper in peace around this nut factory!"

From afar, there was the rise and fall of Jackie's voice as he chased whomever he found: "STEPMOM MAY! CUT HER THUMB OFF! STUCK IT IN AND TURNED THE CRANK!"

It was then that I understood. If Jackie understood, then or ever, I can't say. But the answer seemed simple and obvious once I saw it. If Stepmom May could do that to herself, what might she do to him? If she could lose track of the whereabouts of her own thumb, what chance did he have? What was he, after all, but a little boy, a small, mobile piece of meat? Certainly her connection to him was weaker than her connection to her own hand. Would he find himself tomorrow mistaken in her absentmindedness for a chicken, unclothed and basted in the oven? Must he be alert every second for her next blunder? Would he end up jammed into the Mix-master, among the raisins and nuts?

What might any of our mothers do to any of us, we had to ask, given the strangeness of their love and their stranger neglect, those moments of distraction when they lost track of everything, even themselves, as they stared into worries that were all their own and bigger than anything we could hope to fathom?

I'm not sure how the word spread, but it did. We all heard it and knew to gather in the Haggertys' empty lot. It was a narrow strip that ran down from the gravel road that separated the hill from the houses where we lived. Nobody knew what the Haggertys planned to do with the lot. It wasn't wild, but it wasn't neat and cared for, either, and we all went there as soon as we could get out after supper. We came from different directions and then we were there, nodding and knowing, but without knowing what we knew. For a while, we talked about Korea and the Chinese horde and the dangers that had our fathers leaning in close to their radios and cursing. We got restless and somebody wanted to play pump-pump-pullaway, but other people scoffed. We tried red rover, and then statue, where you got whirled around by somebody, and, when the boy who'd spun you yelled "Freeze!" as you stumbled around, you had to stop and stay that way without moving an inch, and then think of some kind of meaning for how you'd ended up. We



did that for a bit, but we all knew where we were headed. Finally, somebody—it might have been me—said, "Let's play the blackout game."

The light had dimmed and the moon was now high, high enough that it was almost above us in the sky, with lots of stars, so we were ghostly and perfect. Our mood had that something in it that made everyone feel as though this was what we had all been waiting for.

To play the blackout game, you'd

stand with someone behind you, his arms around your chest, and you'd take deep breaths over and over, and the other boy would squeeze your chest until you passed out in a downpour of spangling lights. The person behind you would then lay you down gently on your back in the grass, where you wandered around without yourself, until you woke up from a sleep whose content you'd never know. We took turns. Jerry went, then Tommy and Butch. I went, and then Jackie was there, and he wanted to go. Freddy Bird got behind Jackie, and Jackie huffed and huffed and sailed away, blacking out. Freddy Bird let go and stepped clear. Jackie toppled over backward. His butt landed and then his body slammed back, like a reverse jackknife, and, finally, his head hit with a loud crack. A hurt look came over him, and a big sigh came out of his mouth: "Oh-h-h-h." More of a gasp, really, and he lay very still. Motionless. Pale, I thought. We all stared. He didn't move. Freddy Bird was no longer pleased with how clever he was.

We waited for Jackie to wake up and he didn't. It seemed longer than usual.

"We didn't kill him, did we?"

"You don't die from that."

"It's because he's out twice. Once from the breathing stuff and once from banging his head."

We waited. Jackie didn't move. I went closer.

Staring down, I had the crazy thought that Jackie Rand was like Jesus. Not that he was Jesus but that he was kind of our Jesus, getting the worst of everything for everybody, getting the worst that anybody could dish out, so that we could feel O.K. about our lives. No matter how bad or unfair we might feel things were, they were worse for Jackie.

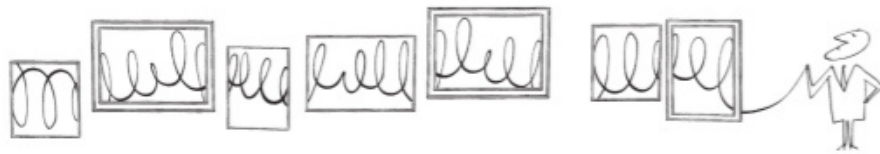
"Should we maybe tell somebody?"

A tiny tear appeared in the corner of each of Jackie's eyes. He was the saddest person on earth, lying there, I thought. The tears dribbled down his cheeks, and then his eyes blinked and opened and he saw where he was. His big pouty lips quivered. He reached to rub the back of his head, and he started to cry really hard, and we knew that he was alive. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST

David Rabe reads his story.

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

SEEING THINGS

Toni Morrison's profound and unrelenting vision.

BY HILTON ALS

Before closing the book on that town and those people, the author has us pause for a few final images and thoughts framed by regret, shame, and horror. The book? Toni Morrison's debut novel, "The Bluest Eye," which turns fifty this year. As the story ends, one of its protagonists, the blighted Pecola Breedlove, has been more or less abandoned by the townspeople, who have treated her with scorn for most of her life; now she's left to wander the streets in madness:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on her shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valley of the mind.

Spectacular even alongside other early novels bathed in the blood of gothic dread—William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying" (1930), say, or Flannery O'Connor's "Wise Blood" or Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" (both published in 1952)—Morrison's book cut a new path through the American literary landscape by placing young black girls at the center of the story.

Like all the principal characters in "The Bluest Eye," Pecola lives in Lorain, Ohio, where Morrison, who died last August, was born in 1931. When we meet Pecola, she is eleven years old but already ancient with sorrow. Her only escape from the emotional abuse that her family and her classmates heap on her is to dream. And the dream is this: that some-

one—God, perhaps—will grant her the gift of blue eyes. The kind of blue eyes Pecola has seen in pictures of the movie star Shirley Temple. The kind of blue eyes that she imagines lighting up the face of the girl on the wrapper of her favorite candies, Mary Janes. Pecola feels, or the world has made her feel, that if she had blue eyes she would, at last, be free—free from her unforgivable blackness, from what her community labelled ugliness long before she could look in a mirror and determine for herself who and what she was. Not that she ever looks in a mirror. She knows what she'd find there: judgment of her blackness, her femaleness, the deforming language that has distorted the reflection of her face. Eventually, Pecola does acquire, or believes she acquires, blue eyes. But in those harrowing final images, Claudia MacTeer, Morrison's spirited nine-year-old narrator, sees what Pecola cannot, what her madness, the result of all that rejection, looks like to the rest of the town: "Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright."

In this short, intellectually expansive, emotionally questioning, and spiritually knowing book, the act of looking—and seeing—is described again and again. One example of many: Peering through a window in their family home, Claudia and her older sister, Frieda, catch a first glimpse of sex. A beloved boarder is consorting with a notorious prostitute. What can it mean, him sucking on that woman's fingers? Is that love? Or is it what a man does to, and not with, a female? Another example: When Pecola goes to buy some of her treasured Mary Janes, the white shopkeeper sees her but can't fix

his attention on her; nothing in his experience has prepared him to recognize a little black girl as an entity.

Despite all this looking, few people, aside from Claudia, bear witness to much. To do so would be to think critically about the society that formed them and be moved to effect change. Instead, there's a great deal of condemnation and parochial disapproval. And it's mostly aimed at black women—especially those mothers who don't keep their home or their children clean. Cleanliness, of course, is next to godliness, and who would want to commit the double sin of being black *and* dirty? Pecola's very presence exacerbates some of the other characters' not so buried feelings about their own race and poverty—liabilities that push these Ohioans apart, rather than unite them: no one wants to be confronted with her own despair, especially when it's reflected in the eyes of another despairing person. And the truth is, by the time we leave Pecola, pecking at the waste on the margins of the world, we, too, may feel a measure of relief at no longer having to see what Morrison sees, her profound and unrelenting vision of what life can do to the forsaken.

Morrison said that she wrote "The Bluest Eye" because she wanted to read it. She began the book in 1965, when she was thirty-four years old. She had majored in English at Howard University, after which she did her M.A. at Cornell. (Her thesis, which she described as "shaky," was about suicide as a theme in the work of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.) Morrison went on to teach at Texas Southern University, and



Morrison in 1970, the year that her intellectually expansive, spiritually knowing first novel, "The Bluest Eye," was published.

then at Howard, in D.C., where she joined a writers' group and worked on a short story about a little black girl who wanted blue eyes. The character was based on a girl she'd known growing up in Ohio, who'd wanted those eyes and decided that God didn't exist when He didn't give them to her. Morrison put the draft in a drawer and got on with the business of living. In 1958, she married the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison; seven years later, the couple was divorced, and Toni was by herself, supporting two young boys and working as an editor at L. W. Singer, a textbook company in Syracuse, New York. During an argument, a neighbor called Morrison a tramp in front of her children. Morrison filed a two-hundred-thousand-dollar lawsuit, which she later dropped. She fought to protect herself, but how do you protect yourself from isolation or loneliness?

Loneliness and hurt are often an artist's first tools, and Morrison put hers to work by remembering and writing about the world she'd come from: the funk of poverty as well as its flowers, the ghost stories that her father, a welder and a Jack-of-all-trades, told his children. In a way, "The Bluest Eye" builds on those tales and honors the years when, without knowing it, Morrison was preparing to become an artist. Set near the start of the Second World War, before postwar prosperity changed Lorain, the book is narrated by Claudia, a feisty child, but the tone is elegiac, since a lot of the novel is driven by memory and the stories that shape it. Before the narrative begins, Morrison gives us the crux of the tale in a sort of preface:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. . . . It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. . . . It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. . . . The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too. There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

By dispensing with narrative suspense up front, Morrison the modernist focusses our attention on character, on how the stories we tell about and to one another often are the story. We first meet Claudia and Frieda when a white neighbor taunts them, and we are shown that whiteness has no erotic pull for Claudia; she has no interest in being defiled or overtaken by it. Given white dolls for Christmas, she destroys them. But, she says, "The dismemberment of the dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so." Claudia has already learned to hate; she knows that the world doesn't admire and validate her the way it does white girls, and she compensates for her vulnerability by fighting for attention and respect.

Pecola has no fight in her. (To see her name and read her story is to be reminded of Peola, another girl of color who is tormented by the question and the reality of race, in Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel "Imitation of Life.") But, to be fair, Pecola comes to Claudia's family under humbling circumstances: the county places her there because she and the other Breedloves—her father, Cholly, who works at the local plant; her mother, Polly, who works as a domestic; and her older brother, Sammy—have no home. Cholly, in addition to burning his house down, went "upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors." ("There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*," Morrison writes, in one of the book's fabulous clarifying paragraphs. "If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. . . . Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition.") At Claudia's, Pecola falls in love with an image of a blue-eyed Shirley Temple on a cup, and in order to peer at it as much as possible she drinks three quarts of milk, which angers Claudia's mother. Testing charity's patience can get you put outdoors, too.

Eventually, the Breedloves are reunited in a storefront. But how can you be reunited if you've never really been together? The three women who live above

the Breedloves, prostitutes named China, Poland, and Miss Marie, have formed a kind of family. Unlike the rest of town, the prostitutes do not despise Pecola, so she visits with them, and Morrison's fantastic ear for dialogue is given free rein; she revels in how women speak, not only to one another but to themselves:

"Hi, dumplin'. Where your socks?" Marie seldom called Pecola the same thing twice, but invariably her epithets were fond ones chosen from menus and dishes that were forever uppermost in her mind.

"Hello, Miss Marie. Hello, Miss China. Hello, Miss Poland."

"You heard me. Where your socks? You as barelegged as a yard dog."

"I couldn't find any."

"Couldn't find any? Must be somethin' in your house that loves socks."

China chuckled. Whenever something was missing, Marie attributed its disappearance to "something in the house that loved it." "There is somethin' in this house that loves brassieres," she would say with alarm. . . .

"How come you got so many boyfriends, Miss Marie?"

"Boyfriends? Boyfriends? Chittlin', I ain't seen a *boy* since nineteen and twenty-seven." . . .

Pecola fingered the fringe of a scarf that lay on the back of a sofa. "I never seen nobody with as many boyfriends as you got, Miss Marie. How come they all love you?"

Marie opened a bottle of root beer. "What else they gone do? They know I'm rich and good-lookin'. They wants to put their toes in my curly hair, and get at my money."

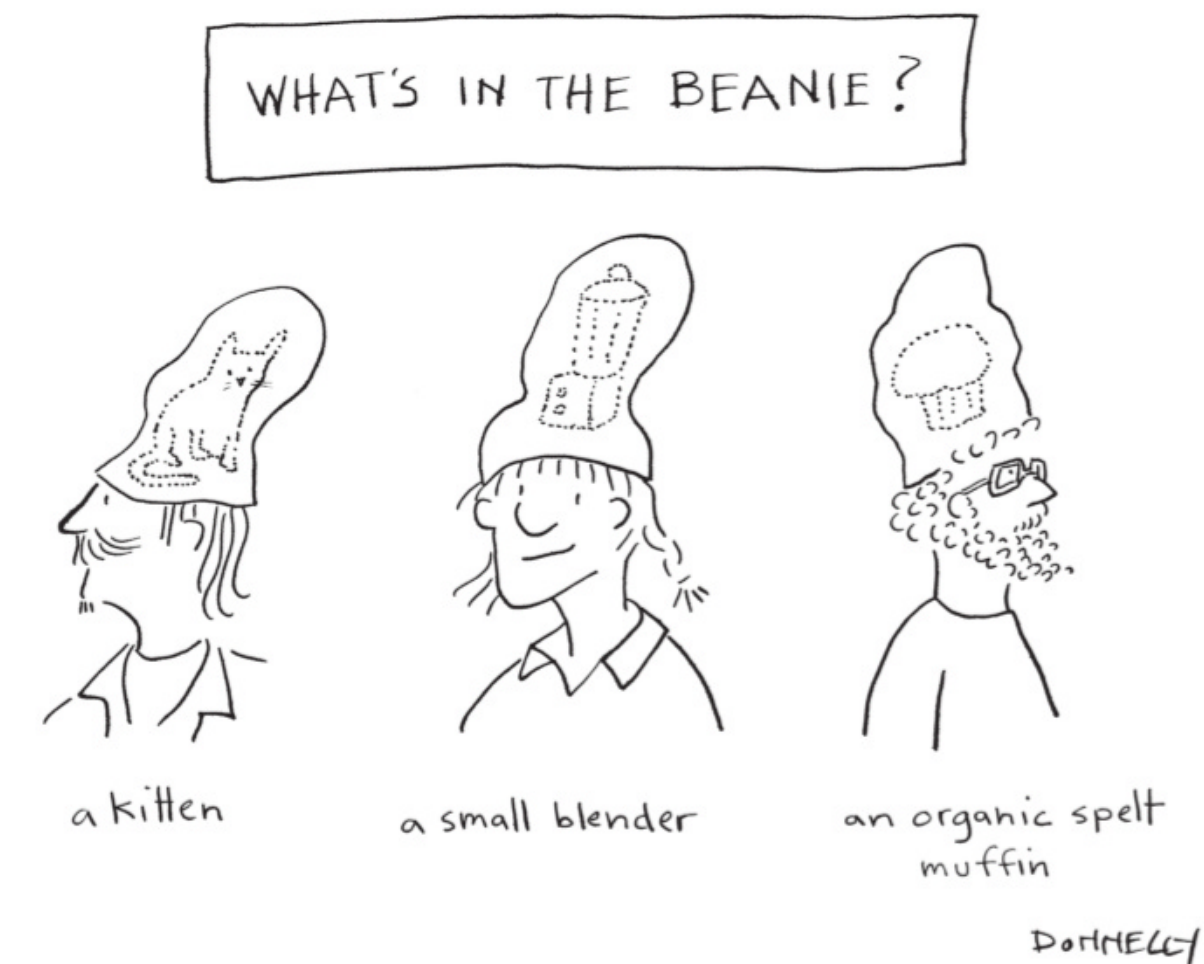
The accuracy of Morrison's dialogue can render you a child again, eavesdropping on those thrilling ladies, whose talk feels like a delicious tease, a promise of warmth and attention. Will these women love Pecola—and stay adults in the process, which is to say, give her the five minutes of innocence and comfort that a black girl of her class is allowed in Lorain? Although Pecola is continually robbed of her innocence, she holds on to the scraps of her dreams with a steadfastness that breaks the heart. Her upstairs neighbors are another aspect of her hope. She loves to listen to these women's stories because, despite the demands of their work, they are free: free to love whomever and spend their money however they like. Later in the conversation, Morrison reveals what the prostitutes keep from Pecola: how life can break you down. Pecola asks Marie if she had children with the man she loved, and Marie answers, "Yeah. Yeah. We had some." Morrison continues, "Marie fidgeted.

She pulled a bobby pin from her hair and began to pick her teeth. That meant she didn't want to talk anymore."

Again and again, Morrison asks what happens to the children. Where are Marie's kids? And what does it do to Pecola to see the furious and grieving Polly Breedlove, who works for a white family, extend more tenderness to her white charge than she ever has to her own children? To tell Polly's story, Morrison's novel expands like an accordion. The music is mournful, and in it we hear Polly's griping monologues about how she came to be with Cholly, who, as a baby, was abandoned on a pile of trash by his mother. Polly met him after her family moved from Alabama to Kentucky as part of the Great Migration. Once married, she and Cholly crossed the river to Ohio, where Polly went to work for a mean white woman. "Look like working for that woman and fighting Cholly was all I did. Tiresome. But I holt on to my jobs." Like her daughter, Polly fell in love with what she was not—the white images she saw flickering on a movie screen:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. . . . [T]he screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don't know. I member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. . . . I got up to get me some candy. I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. . . . There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly.

When Pecola is born, Polly wants to love her, but in the end she can't. "I knowed she was ugly," she says. "Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly." Black, poor, female, ugly: one gives birth to what one feels oneself to be. And other black women don't help, especially if they're like Geraldine, a minor character, who's trying to maintain order and thus keep dirtiness, blackness, and chaos out of her life. One day, Geraldine's son, Junior, convinces Pecola to



come to his house, where he plays a terrible trick on her involving a cat. Geraldine arrives and puts an end to the mayhem, but her disgust bubbles up like vomit when she looks at Pecola, who, she feels, is surely more to blame than her son:

She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "Shet up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. . . . The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between.

We belong as much to the things we throw away as to the things we keep. Pecola is shunned by Cholly and Polly and Geraldine and nearly every other person she comes into contact with, but that doesn't mean they can shake her, in part because they can't shake themselves: she embodies their pain and anguish and disrupts their dreams, no matter how flimsy they may be. And, as horrible as it is, Cholly's abuse of his daughter is an attempt for him to love *someone*. What he knows about love is informed by abandonment and contempt. Like Pecola, he grew up in a world where

love was not only largely absent; it was an emotion to be despised. By extending his stunted understanding—violently, selfishly—to his powerless daughter, he acts out in one of the few ways available to him. But, in a life full of violations, it's the last straw, and Pecola folds in on herself. We listen, at the end of the book, as she talks with the only person she has left: her blue-eyed self.

How many times a minute are you going to look inside that old thing?
I didn't look in a long time.
You did too—
So what? I can look if I want to. . . .
They aren't going anywhere.
I know it. I just like to look. . . .
I'd just like to do something else besides watch you stare in that mirror.
You're just jealous.
I am not.
You are. You wish you had them.
Ha. What would I look like with blue eyes?

I remember finishing that section of the novel, at age ten or eleven, and feeling the sharp chill and awfulness of being split in two. What did it mean to not be a "whole" person? Part of Morrison's genius had to do with knowing that our cracked selves are a manifestation of a sick society, the ailing body of America, whose racial malaise keeps producing Pecolas. You can find her everywhere. She's the dark-skinned woman trying to lighten her complexion with

bleaching creams; she's the woman who undergoes surgery to thin her lips or her nose; she's the girl who wears colored contact lenses so that the world can see her differently.

When you're a kid, a black- or brown- or yellow- or red-skinned kid, most of the time you don't start the morning thinking about how racism will ruin your day. What you want to know is who will love you, and what surprises that love will bring you that day. It's the world that brings hate to your front door, and it's hate that makes you hide who you are. As a kid, I responded viscerally to "The Bluest Eye," for a number of reasons, starting with the book jacket. Morrison, in the photograph on the back cover, looked like the kind of person my family might have known, and if she was one of us that meant that one of my four beautiful older sisters could, perhaps, write a book, too.

Now I can see that my hope for my sisters was a way of having hope for myself, hope that I might become the artist I wanted to be. I held on to every bit of hope I could find. I felt Pecola's pre-

dicament in the pit of my stomach not because folks thought I was ugly but because I knew that, in my small, working-class West Indian community in Brooklyn, my sexuality was considered ugly. My black world then (and, to be frank, it hasn't changed much) defined itself by the rules of heterosexuality, and one of the few things its inhabitants could agree on was how spiritually abhorrent gay people were—at best, objects of derision. I felt as trapped in Brooklyn as Pecola did in Lorain. I didn't have a dream of blue eyes, but I did dream of a world full of culture and artists to which I would one day belong, if, like Toni Morrison, I wrote books. I would try to write a perfect book, like Morrison's first novel, but in my version the character of Soaphead Church—a celibate gay West Indian who Pecola believes has conjured up her blue eyes—wouldn't be yet another manifestation of black American prejudice against West Indian difference. Instead, he would fall in love, and maybe prosper, and not live his life as an outsider. In short, I would try to overturn what the society in "The Bluest Eye" said lay

in store for me: a kind of madness. This understanding, of course, took many years to form, because I didn't know back then that gay men could find ways to love one another, let alone themselves. I didn't grow up at a time when you talked about the problem of not seeing yourself in books or of "negative" portrayals; you hunted and dug for the characters and metaphors that mattered to you, and that was the fun—and the reward—of reading and looking at pictures.

Morrison was thirty-nine years old when she published "The Bluest Eye." Although she claimed in a 1981 interview with Charles Ruas, "I never wanted to grow up to be a writer, I just wanted to grow up to be an adult," it is the work of a mature artist who has tired of waiting for someone else to express her views. Meanwhile, Morrison the editor was also gaining in strength. By the time "The Bluest Eye" came out, she had been an editor of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction at Random House for nearly three years. Her colleagues didn't know she was a burgeoning novelist, because she didn't tell them. "They weren't paying me for that," she once said. Eventually, a co-worker spotted a copy of "The Bluest Eye," and Morrison's subsequent novels were published by Knopf, a Random House imprint.

Like Morrison's writing, her editing had a very particular goal: to offer readers stories about blacks, women, and other marginalized characters which hadn't been told before. This desire—this need—seems to have been with Morrison since she was a student at Howard. In a 2019 documentary about her, "The Pieces I Am," Morrison recalls that as a student she wanted to write about the black characters in Shakespeare's plays, but her professor was "outraged" at the idea. As an editor, she chose to bring those black stories to the fore. Now it's astonishing to look back at the range of her projects: a book on Southern cuisine; a history of the Cotton Club; fiction by Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara; poems by Lucille Clifton and by Henry Dumas, who was killed at thirty-three by a New York City subway cop; the autobiography of Angela Davis; and, in 1974, the historic anthology "The Black Book," which was reissued in December.



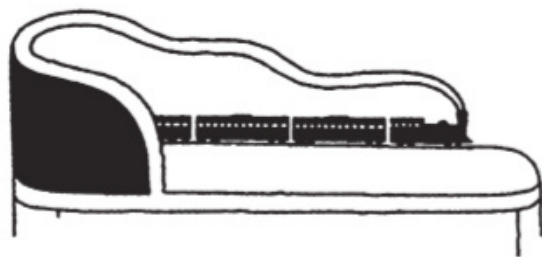
"The Black Book" was intended, like "The Bluest Eye," to combat the "Black is beautiful" jingoism of the time, and to show real black lives from the ghastly slave ships of the sixteen-hundreds to America in the twentieth century. After she met Middleton (Spike) Harris, a collector of black ephemera, who introduced her to other collectors—among them Roger Furman and Morris Levitt—Morrison got to work with a designer, Jack Ribik, putting together a kind of scrapbook of black American history and life. She jettisoned the idea of having text dominate the collection, for fear that it would give it too much of an ideological spin.

"I am not sure what the project meant to the authors," she wrote in a 1974 essay, "but for me it was like growing up black one more time." It's easy to glean what she meant by that. Morrison, like many black Americans of her generation, had come of age with the idea that black achievement—as well as the hard times—formed a kind of lore, an oral history that was passed down with pride. In the same essay, Morrison wrote:

The point is not to soak in some warm bath of nostalgia about the good old days—*there were none!*—but to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks now growing up. . . . To create something that might last, that would bear witness to the quality and variety of black life before it became the topic of every Ph.D. dissertation and the focal point of all the mindlessness that seems to have joined the smog of California's movie world. Whatever that "something" was, it would have to be honest, would have to be rendered through our own collective consciousness. It would have to assume that we were still tough, and that our egos were not threads of jelly in constant need of glue.

"Nothing could have interfered with my putting this book together," Morrison said, in an interview in the *Times* in 1974. "I was afraid that young people would come to believe that black history began in 1964 or that there was slavery, there was a gap, and then there was 1964." In "The Black Book," which she worked on for a feverish eighteen-month period, Morrison wanted to provide visible evidence of where blackness had been and where it was going. She included documents—a patent showing that William B. Purvis had invented

the fountain pen, for instance—and photographs, among them one of Lena Horne bathing in her drive and significance, and one of the black cowboy Nat Love. There were descriptions of voodoo charms; a full-color ad showing a black baby in a white cap and gown, advertising Sunlight Soap; pictures of clothes made by slaves; and another patent, this one for Norbert Rillieux's "improvement in sugar-making." There were lines of poetry by Langston Hughes



and by Henry Dumas, whom she considered one of the most talented of her authors. There were images of black men being burned or lynched, and a clipping about Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed one of her children so that she would not grow up in slavery—a story that haunted Morrison and inspired her 1987 novel, "Be-loved," another tale of innocence lost and of black women alone in the world together. You can also find in "The Black Book" other sources of inspiration for Morrison the novelist. There is an excerpt from Gwendolyn Brooks's profound poem about abortion, "The Mother"—"Believe me, I loved you all. / Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you / All"—which brings to mind Morrison's "Song of Solomon" (1977) and the extraordinary speech that the healer Pilate delivers near the end of her life about wishing she had known more people so that she could have loved them. With "The Black Book," which would be nominated for a National Book Award, the editor was also feeding the creator. (As with all great books, one wants "The Black Book" to be all things for all people, and yet the collection is devoid of any story or image of an out gay person—there is no mention of Gladys Bentley, for instance, or Bruce Nugent, let alone of James Baldwin or Audre Lorde. Just as Morrison was afraid that young people might think black history

jumped from slavery to the civil-rights era, a young queer kid today may wonder, leafing through the reprint, if black gayness has been deliberately erased or "just" forgotten.)

When the book was published, Margo Jefferson, then a critic at *Newsweek*, wrote, "As a young girl I was taught that black surgeon Daniel Hale Williams had performed the first successful heart operation; that blacks were shipbuilders, inventors and landowners, and that I was never to sing a song that used the words darky, coon or crow. 'You need this for yourself,' cautioned my father; 'and for ammunition,' added my mother. 'The Black Book' is confirmation and ammunition." Morrison welcomed and encouraged dialogues between black critics and artists. "White people can't do it for us," she said in a 1974 interview. "That's our responsibility and in some way we have to do it. I say you must always tell the truth. And I tell you that we are not weak people and we can stand it." But first you need serious and seriously good work to inspire the discourse. For me, "The Bluest Eye" and "The Black Book," works of the highest quality, were tangible and galvanizing evidence that to be an artist meant arming yourself with the truth—about where you came from and where you hope to go—and that hypocrisy was the enemy of art. Morrison showed me what was possible.

In an unpublished biographical statement that she wrote around the time that she was promoting "The Black Book" and her second novel, "Sula" (1973), she offered a window into her sensibility, which was driven by loss, effort, survival, and not turning away from any of it. Her relatives on both sides were migrants from the South, she explained, who had suffered and persevered. She went on:

Even before I knew what they had done to stay alive, to raise their children, and to be better than their detractors—even before that, their eyes impressed me. They were like wells of stacked mirrors—each with a depth and refraction of its own. . . . The closest I can come to describing it is the look of people who have lived places where there are great distances to view. Desert people, or people who live on savannahs or mountain tops—they have the look I remember in my parents and their relatives. Their eyes were terrible, made bearable only by the frequency of their laughter. ♦

SIMPLE PLANS

The pitfalls and possibilities of the new minimalism.

BY JIA TOLENTINO



The new literature of minimalism is full of stressful advice. Pack up all your possessions, unpack things only as needed, give away everything that's still packed after a month. Or wake up early, pick up every item you own, and consider whether or not it sparks joy. See if you can wear just thirty-three items of clothing for three months. Know that it's possible to live abundantly with only a hundred possessions. Don't organize—purge. Digitize your photos. Get rid of the things you bought to impress people. Downsize your apartment. Think constantly about what will enable you to live the best life possible. Never buy anything on sale.

Recently, I spent a few months absorbing the new minimalist gospel, beginning with Marie Kondo, the celebrity decluttering guru, whose book “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up” has sold more than ten million copies, and whose stance can seem twee but is rooted in Shinto tradition: having fewer possessions allows us to care for those possessions as if they had souls. I also turned to Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, who call themselves the Minimalists and, under that name, run a blog, publish books, and host a podcast that is downloaded as many as three million times a month. I read the blog *Be More with Less*, which is writ-

ten by Courtney Carver, who came to minimalism after being given a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and views the practice as a pathway to love and self-care. Also on my syllabus were the books “Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less,” by Greg McKeown, for whom minimalism is a habit of highly effective people; “The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own,” by Joshua Becker, a former pastor who wants his readers to free up their time and money for charitable causes; and “Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism,” by Fumio Sasaki, who writes with winning self-deprecation, admitting that his simple life style might make him seem like a loser.

As I waded through this course of study, I felt like a dirty sponge being irradiated in the microwave: I was trapped, unpleasantly, but a cleansing fire was beginning to rage within. I Kondoed my sock drawer, tenderly unravelling lumpy balls of wool and cotton and laying each pair flat. I made daily pilgrimages to Goodwill. When I went home to Texas for the holidays, I entered my parents' apartment as a whirling dervish of minimalist self-satisfaction, hectoring them to toss out their kitchen doodads and excess Tupperware. Within hours of arrival, I had filled six large trash bags with clothes to donate. “See?!” I howled, irritating myself and everyone around me. “You get rid of the things you *don't* need so that you can focus on the things you *do*!”

I sounded, I imagine, like many of the converts to what might be considered the latest wave in an intermittent American impulse. In 1977, the social scientists Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell observed that, for several years, “the popular press has paid occasional attention to stories of people returning to the simple life.” Elgin and Mitchell believed that this smattering of articles reflected a social movement that could bring about a “major transformation of traditional American values.” They called the movement “voluntary simplicity,” and saw it as a potential solution not only to “growing social malaise” but also to ecological destruction and the “unmanageable scale and complexity of institutions.” They believed that a few million people were practicing full voluntary simplicity, and that as much as half the U.S. population

Beneath the vision of “less” as a life style lies a path to something more profound.

was sympathetic to it. Estimating the “maximum plausible growth of VS,” they wrote that as many as a third of all Americans might be converted to the simple life by the year 2000.

That didn’t happen. But, in 2008, the housing crisis and the banking collapse exposed the fantasy of easy acquisition as humiliating and destructive; for many people, it became newly necessary and desirable to learn to rely on less. It is tempting to interpret the new minimalism as a kind of cultural aftershock of that financial disruption, and perhaps it is, in part. But, at the same time that Kondo and her cohort have popularized a form of material humility, minimalism has become an increasingly aspirational and deluxe way of life. The hashtag #minimalism pulls up more than seventeen million photos on Instagram; many of the top posts depict high-end interior spaces. Last April, Kim Kardashian West appeared in a *Vogue* video walking through her sixty-million-dollar California mansion, a stark, blank, monochromatic palace that she described as a “minimal monastery.” Less is more attractive when you’ve got a lot of money, and minimalism is easily transformed from a philosophy of intentional restraint into an aesthetic language through which to assert a form of walled-off luxury—a self-centered and competitive impulse that is not so different from the acquisitive attitude that minimalism purports to reject.

It is rarely acknowledged, by either the life-hack-minded authors or the proponents of minimalist design, that many people have minimalism forced upon them by circumstances that render impossible a serene, jewel-box life style. Nor do they mention that poverty and trauma can make frivolous possessions seem like a lifeline rather than a burden. Many of today’s gurus maintain that minimalism can be useful no matter one’s income, but the audience they target is implicitly affluent—the pitch is never about making do with less because you have no choice. Millburn and Nicodemus frequently describe their past lives as spiritually empty twentysomethings with six-figure incomes. McKeown pitches his insights at people who have a surplus of options as a consequence of success. Kondo recently launched an online store, suggesting that the left hand

might declutter while the right hand buys a seventy-five-dollar rose-quartz tuning fork. Today’s minimalism, with its focus on self-improvement, feels oddly dominated by a logic of accumulation. Less is always more, or “more, more, more,” as Millburn and Nicodemus write: “more time, more passion, more experiences, more growth, more contribution, more contentment—and more freedom.”

The Longing for Less: Living with Minimalism,” a new book by the journalist and critic Kyle Chayka, arrives not as an addition to the minimalist canon but as a corrective to it. Chayka aims to find something deeper within the tradition than an Instagram-friendly aesthetic and the “saccharine and predigested” advice of self-help literature. Writing in search of the things that popular minimalism sweeps out of the frame—the void, transience, messiness, uncertainty—he surveys minimalist figures in art, music, and philosophy, searching for a “minimalism of ideas rather than things.”

Along the way, he offers sharp critiques of thing-oriented minimalism. The sleek, simple devices produced by Apple, which encourage us to seamlessly glide through the day by tapping and swiping on pocket-size screens, rely on a hidden “maximalist assemblage,” Chayka writes: “server farms absorbing massive amounts of electricity, Chinese factories where workers die by suicide, devastated mud pit mines that produce tin.” Also, he points out, the glass walls in Apple’s headquarters were marked with Post-it notes to keep employees from smacking into them, like birds. Later in the book, Chayka examines Philip Johnson’s Glass House—a startling, transparent box in New Canaan, Connecticut—and concludes that its beauty manifests a “megalomaniacal possessiveness” over both the surrounding landscape and the experience of anyone who enters. This sort of aestheticized emptiness, Chayka argues, is “not particularly radical; it might even be conservative,” given its reliance on control and exclusion. Plus, the ceiling leaked when it rained.

More beguiling to Chayka are artists who have no interest in directing the lives of others. He writes about Agnes Martin—who considered herself an Abstract Expressionist but whose poised,

transcendent paintings have been claimed for Minimalism—and Walter De Maria, whose installation “The New York Earth Room,” a field of dirt in a mostly empty white space, has been quietly confounding people in SoHo since 1977. He visits Donald Judd’s “100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum,” in Marfa, Texas, which defies any attempt to ascribe emotional meaning to it—the aluminum boxes are “just *there*,” Chayka writes, “empty of content except for the sheer fact of their physical presence, obdurate and silent, explaining nothing and with nothing to explain.” Such a sculpture might sound “deathly boring, more math problem than artwork,” but, as you walk through the exhibit, with the desert sun setting the silvery containers alight, they become a “constant affirmation of the simple possibility of sensation.” Elsewhere in the book, he writes about the philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who described ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, as a practice that links beauty to ephemerality and death.

These are the models for a deeper, more honest, less self-centered minimalism, Chayka believes: a way of living that makes “simple things more complicated, not the other way around.” Still, he is not immune to shallower forms of the aesthetic. When he flies to Tokyo, hoping to understand concepts like *mono no aware*—the Japanese idea of sensitivity to impermanence—the first thing he encounters is the stark, white, dehumanized Airbnb where he will be staying. Despite his intent to critique, he is being catered to, sometimes successfully. A developer puts up a condo building across the street from his Brooklyn apartment, and stages one of its units as an “Instagram-ready tableau of white bed, white nightstand, white table, white kitchen cabinets,” visible through big windows. Chayka admits, grudgingly, that the place looks stylish.

The Brooklyn apartment and the Tokyo Airbnb are examples of a style that Chayka has called AirSpace, a term he coined in 2016, in a piece for the Verge, to describe the look of cafés, co-working spaces, and short-term rental apartments all over the globe. “I can’t say no to a tasteful, clean, modern life space,” he wrote then. “But,” he added, “thinking through its roots and negative implications makes me reconsider my attachment.” Chayka’s

writing tends to center on phenomena that conjure aspiration, emptiness, and emotional distance: as a journalist, he's covered luxury cryptocurrency, the blandly appealing life-style magazine *Kinfolk*, and the streetwear brand Supreme. "The Longing for Less" revisits earlier essays and reporting on the Minimalists, the Japanese philosopher Shūzō Kuki, and Marie Kondo.

His dual response to the all-white apartment is one of the only moments in "The Longing for Less" when Chayka acknowledges his attraction to superficial minimalism, but that attraction pulses throughout the book. The writing has a careful tastefulness that occasionally conforms to what Chayka, in a different context, calls the "house style of the non-place and the generic city." The table of contents is presented as four pristine boxes, with high-toned, one-word chapter titles—"Reduction," "Emptiness," "Silence," "Shadow"—arranged in a perfect grid. Each chapter is subdivided into eight sections, and Chayka suggests that "The Longing for Less" might be wandered through in the manner of an art exhibit, that the blank spaces between contrasting examples will generate unexpected lessons. (Chayka's reporting on Supreme, which was published by Racked, was also organized by a gridded table of contents, guiding readers to considerations of "Hype," "Japan," and "Fandom," among other subjects.)

Nonfiction forms that rely on the generative potential of white space, like poetry and the lyric essay, require a distinct forcefulness of voice and vision to succeed; in its absence, this kind of mannered subtlety can be frustrating. Most of the sections in "The Longing for Less" end on a glancing note of epiphany, such as "Simplicity doesn't have to be an end point—it can lead to new beginnings," which is the last line of a paragraph two-thirds of the way through the book.

In a way, Chayka's book replicates the conflict he's attempting to uncover—between the security and cleanliness of a frictionless affect and the necessity of friction for uncovering truth. He does have moments of productive discomfort: outside the concert hall where John Cage debuted "4'33"," he wanders for four and a half minutes of silence in honor of Cage's blank composition, and finds him-

self disappointed by the mundane sounds of leaf blowers and airplanes, before becoming unexpectedly attuned to the gentle sound of a hidden stream. He goes to the Guggenheim to hear Erik Satie's proto-minimalist composition "Vexations," an experiment in extreme monotony, and it proves intolerable, creating a jarring awareness of the often inadequate here and now. But Chayka best conveys the unnerving existential confrontation that minimalism can create in his capsule biographies of figures such as Julius Eastman, the composer who used minimalist structures as a means of asserting personal dissonance. In the nineteen-eighties, Eastman began living, on and off, in Tompkins Square Park; he wrote music on the subway and gave his compositions away in bars. Explaining the titles of his pieces "Crazy Nigger" and "Evil Nigger," Eastman said, "What I mean by niggers is that thing which is fundamental, that person or thing that attains to a 'basicness,' a 'fundamentality,' and eschews that thing which is superficial or, what can we say, elegant."

True minimalism, Chayka insists, is "not about consuming the right things or throwing out the wrong; it's about challenging your deepest beliefs in an attempt to engage with things as they are, to not shy away from reality or its lack of answers." I suspect that some recent converts to minimalism have already come to this conclusion. Underneath the vision of "less" as an optimized life style lies the path to something stranger and more profound: a mode of living that strips away protective barriers and heightens the miracle of human presence, and the urgency, today, of what that miracle entails.

The self-help minimalists say that keeping expenses low and purchases to a minimum can help create a life that is clear and streamlined. This practice can also lead to the conclusion that there is not only too much stuff in your apartment but too much stuff in the world—that there is, you might say, an epidemic of overproduction. If you did say this, you would be quoting Karl Marx, who declared that this was the case in 1848, when he and Friedrich Engels published "The Communist Manifesto." Comparing a "society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and

of exchange" to "the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells," they contended that there was "too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce." Hence, they suggested, the boom-and-bust cycle of capitalism, which brings the periodic "destruction of a mass of productive forces"—as, perhaps, we experienced in 2008, before the rise of Kondo and company.

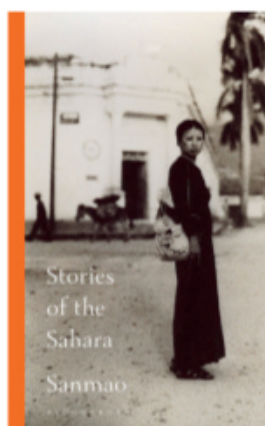
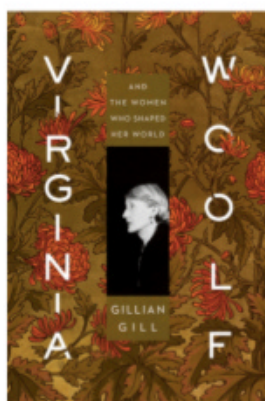
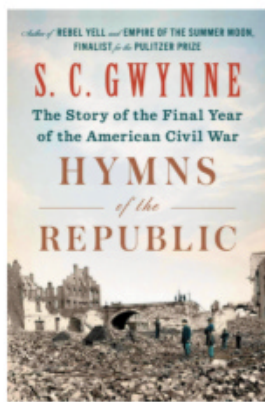
Today's most popular minimalists do not mention Marx. Sometimes they address the importance of freeing oneself from the dictates of the market. In "Goodbye, Things," Sasaki writes about the importance of figuring out your minimum required monthly income, and encourages readers to consider the environmental consequences of their life styles. Millburn and Nicodemus write about the joy that comes from choosing to earn less money, even if they avoid discussing the more common situation of having your wages kept low against your will. But they also assure their audience that "capitalism is not broken"—we are. They insist that there's "nothing wrong with earning a shedload of money—it's just that the money doesn't matter if you're not happy with who you've become in the process." Even these sincere prophets of anti-consumerism are hesitant to conclude that the excessive purchasing of stuff may be a symptom of larger structural problems, or that a life built around maximum accumulation may be not only insufficiently conducive to happiness but actually, morally bad.

The worst versions of life-style minimalism frame simplicity not as a worthy end in itself but as an instrument—a tool of self-improvement, or of high-end consumption, or of self-improvement *through* high-end consumption. It is a vision shaped by the logic of the market: the self is perpetually being improved; its environment is ready for public display and admiration; it methodically sheds all inefficiencies and flaws. This vision also forgoes any recognition that the kind of salvation so many people are seeking can happen only at the level of the system rather than at that of the individual. (As Chayka puts it, "Your bedroom might be cleaner, but the world stays bad.") The difference

between profound and superficial minimalism may be a matter of conceptual inversion: the question is whether you accept diminishment in order to more efficiently assert your will or whether you assert your will in order to accept the unseen bounty of self-diminishment. This is also where the minimalism of ideas meets the minimalism of things—the latter argues that ridding yourself of possessions means ridding yourself of trouble and difficulty; the former suggests that the end point of stripping away excess is the realization that the world is more troubled, more difficult, more discomfiting, and also more wondrous and full of possibility than it seems.

The term that Elgin and Mitchell used in 1977, “voluntary simplicity,” was borrowed from Richard Gregg, a lawyer from Colorado who, after the First World War, gave up the law and took a job with a railway workers’ union. In the early twenties, hundreds of thousands of railway workers went on strike, and more than a dozen people died in clashes between strikers and armed guards. Gregg, devastated, came across a book of Gandhi’s writings in a Chicago bookstore, and travelled to India to meet Gandhi and learn about peaceful resistance. In 1934, he published “The Power of Nonviolence,” which Martin Luther King, Jr., later described as one of the books that had had the greatest influence on him. Gregg published “The Value of Voluntary Simplicity” in 1936. In it, he calls capitalism a “gravely defective” system that ought to be “reformed or ended.”

Several years ago, Duane Elgin, who has become an author and an activist focussed on sustainability, published a paper arguing that either we can “continue along our current path of denial and bargaining” until we drain our natural resources and our capacity to relate to one another as humans or we can “awaken ourselves from the dream of limitless material growth and actively invent new ways to live within the material limits of the Earth.” This is, in the end, the most convincing argument for minimalism: with less noise in our heads, we might hear the emergency sirens more clearly. If we put down some baggage, we might move more swiftly. We might address the frantic, frightening, intensifying conditions that have prompted us to think of minimalism as an attractive escape. ♦



BRIEFLY NOTED

Hymns of the Republic, by S. C. Gwynne (Scribner). In August, 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant, reflecting on threats to the Union cause, wrote that the Confederacy’s “only hope now is a divided North.” He was right to be worried. As this taut, propulsive history of the war’s final year demonstrates, the infighting that was roiling Northern politics nearly changed the course of history. President Lincoln, seeking reelection, faced exhausted voters, strident opposition, assaults from within his own party over the Emancipation Proclamation, and even calls for unconditional peace. His allies considered electoral victory “an impossibility,” but knew that any other result would imperil the war effort—a reminder that a deeply divided America is one decidedly up for grabs.

Virginia Woolf, by Gillian Gill (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). In this vibrant biography, Woolf emerges not only as a formidable writer and feminist but as a reluctant player in a long-running family soap opera, replete with dysfunctional Victorian patriarchs, martyred mothers, insanity, and a great many extramarital affairs. Gill traces the writer’s psychological development via her connections with others, making use of her voluminous correspondence. The wild doings of the Bloomsbury group are told with gossipy verve, but more revealing are accounts of the “fiercely loving and protective” bonds Woolf shared with the women in her family. Pointing to a generations-old “pattern of female relations” that encouraged creativity and empowerment, Gill shows how Woolf wrote her foremothers’ legacy into her work, bequeathing it “to the children and grandchildren of her mind.”

Divide Me by Zero, by Lara Vapnyar (Tin House). Katya, the narrator of this elegiac yet funny novel, traces the defining moments of her life—from Soviet Russia to Staten Island, and from unhappy marriage to unhappy engagement and unhappy affair. The novel is framed by the death of her strict mother, a mathematician whose scribbled notecards, for a math-inspired self-help book she was writing, serve as enigmatic signposts. As Katya strives to find herself as a writer and an independent woman, the complex logic of her mother’s maxims seems to cloud everything, even love: “One way to describe love according to the gospel of math is as a condition that causes a dimensional shift.”

Stories of the Sahara, by Sanmao, translated from the Chinese by Mike Fu (Bloomsbury). Available in English for the first time, these semiautobiographical stories by a cherished Taiwanese writer depict the life of El Aaiún, a small town in Spanish-controlled Western Sahara, where she moved in 1973, after being captivated by a feature in *National Geographic*. Headstrong but compassionate, Sanmao made friends with local Sahrawis and Spanish bureaucrats, absorbing and questioning everything around her. The stories weave the quotidian and the historical into a single narrative: the wedding of a child bride; legends of evil spirits, heard while camping at night; rising hostility to both Spanish rule and the looming influence of Morocco.

FAILING UPWARD

The dangers of ambition in “A Soldier’s Play” and “Timon of Athens.”

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



Give me a ladder to climb—the jungle gym of the corporate org chart, the hazy inner ranks of some large church, the series of badges and pins upon which military order is maintained—and I can spin out a story about America. Hierarchy is our great imaginative canvas. We don’t want to know just about the inner workings of the mob, but also about how the one guy became the boss; follow not just baseball but the World Series; if the hero’s a priest, he’d better have a plan to be Pope. Tell us how you survived, sure, but also how you got over.

There’s a technical aspect to this narrative preference: upward motion feels like forward motion, and success has beats

that are easy to chart and make propulsive. But the deeper issue is moral—against our higher instincts, and despite the ample evidence of experience, we stow away a pinch of belief that there’s more freedom at the top of the pile.

Charles Fuller’s “A Soldier’s Play”—which debuted in 1981 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982—is obsessed with signs of seniority. Thwarted advancement makes the piece move. The play, which has been revived by the Roundabout Theatre Company, at American Airlines Theatre, under the direction of Kenny Leon, takes place in the mid-nineteen-forties, on a segregated Army base in Louisiana, where a black sergeant, Vernon Waters

(David Alan Grier), has been mysteriously killed. Everybody blames his death on the Klan, but nobody seems to really know what happened. Waters, whom we glimpse in flashbacks that bleed into the present investigation of his death, is a proud, haughty, casually abusive man who wields his rank as a bludgeon and whose humor—Grier’s well-honed specialty as a performer, now spiked with rancor—is a firearm trained on the soldiers under his command. He’s a bully; Grier makes his malice terrifying, but also seductive.

Waters has it in for the Southerners in the regiment. Their regionalisms and humble folkways—songs and jokes, manners refined and reinforced by fear of violence and, often, death—seem to him mere bowing and scraping and jiving at the feet of the white world. Waters thinks these men are holding blacks back with their levity and obeisance. Better, he thinks, to rise within the white man’s meritocracy and eventually subvert it on its own terms. He’s a perverse opposite of the great writer and activist Audre Lorde, who warned that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Notions of uplift, shorn of love, have made him a husk. His ascent within the military is, to him, an accrual of human dignity; he uses official discipline—taking away one man’s hard-earned “stripes” over a trifle, sending another man to military jail—to strip others of their dignity.

Yet, for all his grasping, he lacks the respect that his success was supposed to win. Even his pettiest order can be reversed by Captain Taylor (Jerry O’Connell), the white man who’s the head honcho on the base. Waters hates just about everybody, but especially a private named C.J. Memphis (J. Alphonse Nicholson), a star baseball player who sings the hell out of the blues and wins more favor from whites by way of his talent than Waters does by his rank. (This implicit dismissal of art rings true even today; Waters is a bit like the contemporary corporate striver who brags about never cracking open a work of fiction.)

There are two plays here: the interstitial telling of how Waters’s wickedness, born of racism and spurred on by sheer spite, sends him spiralling downward, toward the grave; and a much more rote detective story about how his killer is caught. “A Soldier’s Play” is weakest precisely as it strains to transition between

David Alan Grier plays a sergeant who wields his rank as a bludgeon.

these two strands: there are awkwardly choreographed scene changes performed by the privates, and work songs that are effective on their own but not necessarily as the hinges they're meant to be.

Blair Underwood plays Captain Richard Davenport, a black man who has come to the base to sift through the facts. He inspires derision from Captain Taylor, who just can't get used to the sight of a black officer (not to mention one who wears sleek dark aviators indoors), and awed reverence (salutes and grins and slyly happy repetitions of his title, Captain) from the blacks who are gratified to see a version of themselves represented in so starchy a shirt, such an impeccable tie. Davenport's rank kicks up almost as much chaos as Waters's death.

Underwood is fine in the role, but his is by far the cornier half of the proceedings. There's too much focus on his relationship, and eventual fraught reconciliation, with Taylor, and too little on what's behind the anguished howl he belts out after he's broken the case. There could be a terser version of this show whose focus is all on Waters, and on the inner decline that accompanies his professional advance. Grier plays the sergeant with a pleasing near-incoherence, his splashes of anger and despair always threatening the arrival of fiercer waters. One minute he charms and the next he bites. He flexes his face into pantomimes of unspeakable cruelty and turns his roly-poly body into a harbinger of constant threat.

Waters's final words are the first ones we hear spoken: "They still hate you!"—it's the truth as a taunt. The range and precision of Grier's voice makes his upper registers citrusy and substantial, and his lower tones ragged, like the sound of a blown-out subwoofer. The multivalence of that voice, and of Grier's entire performance—now comic, now inviting doom, and, finally, much too late, sodden with remorse—gives his moments onstage their bitter, dismal truth: upward motion means nothing when your ceiling is somebody else's floor.

"Timon of Athens," William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton's brusque tale of hard luck, directed by Simon Godwin at the Theatre for a New Audience's Polonsky Shakespeare Center, is another disillusioned illustration of social position gone sour. Timon

(Kathryn Hunter) is a rich woman—Hunter effortlessly pulls off the flipped gender of the protagonist, originally written as male—who is profligately generous to her friends, and who learns in the worst way that they won't return the favor. The show opens with Timon hosting a grand dinner. Little do the revellers know that their benefactor is badly in debt. The good times are about to shudder to a close.

The sanest among Timon's guests is the astringently philosophical Apemantus (Arnie Burton), who so scorns the display that he pulls a root vegetable and some water out of what looks to be a lunch box and plops down at a makeshift kids' table. Despite his warnings, and those of Timon's loyal attendants, she has spent her very last cent, and, when the bill collectors come, the rich partyers are no help. Soon, Timon, repelled by Athens and its "affable wolves," is living on the city's outskirts, her once sparkling whites sooty and the fun in her face gone.

The language in the latter half of the play is full of the rhetorical device chiasmus. In a typical passage, a pair of thieves come to Timon on her heath in order to "wait for certain money"; in her refusal, she inverts their syntax as well as their wishes—if only "money were as certain as your waiting." These clever phrasings are echoed in Hunter's astounding performance. She brings to each dense moment a platter bejewelled with ironies. There's a wistful murmur under her act as the happy socialite; homelessness and crazily jaded misanthropy turn her into a kind of Catskills comic. (One running bit is her patter with the audience.) Hunter's voice is low, husky, and silkily resonant, a rare instrument, and the more destitute her Timon becomes the more ardently she sings her syllables. Each of her fine gestures expresses a paradox that sits beneath the text. Her eyes rage and then melt, all in the space of a second.

There is neither up nor down, utter failure nor lasting success, for Hunter's wind-tossed Timon—only the person nearly naked, cast away and caught in life's centrifuge. No great nation, or battalion, or sign of status is relevant to existence at the city's peripheries: better to search for higher loves and find a friend or two. ♦



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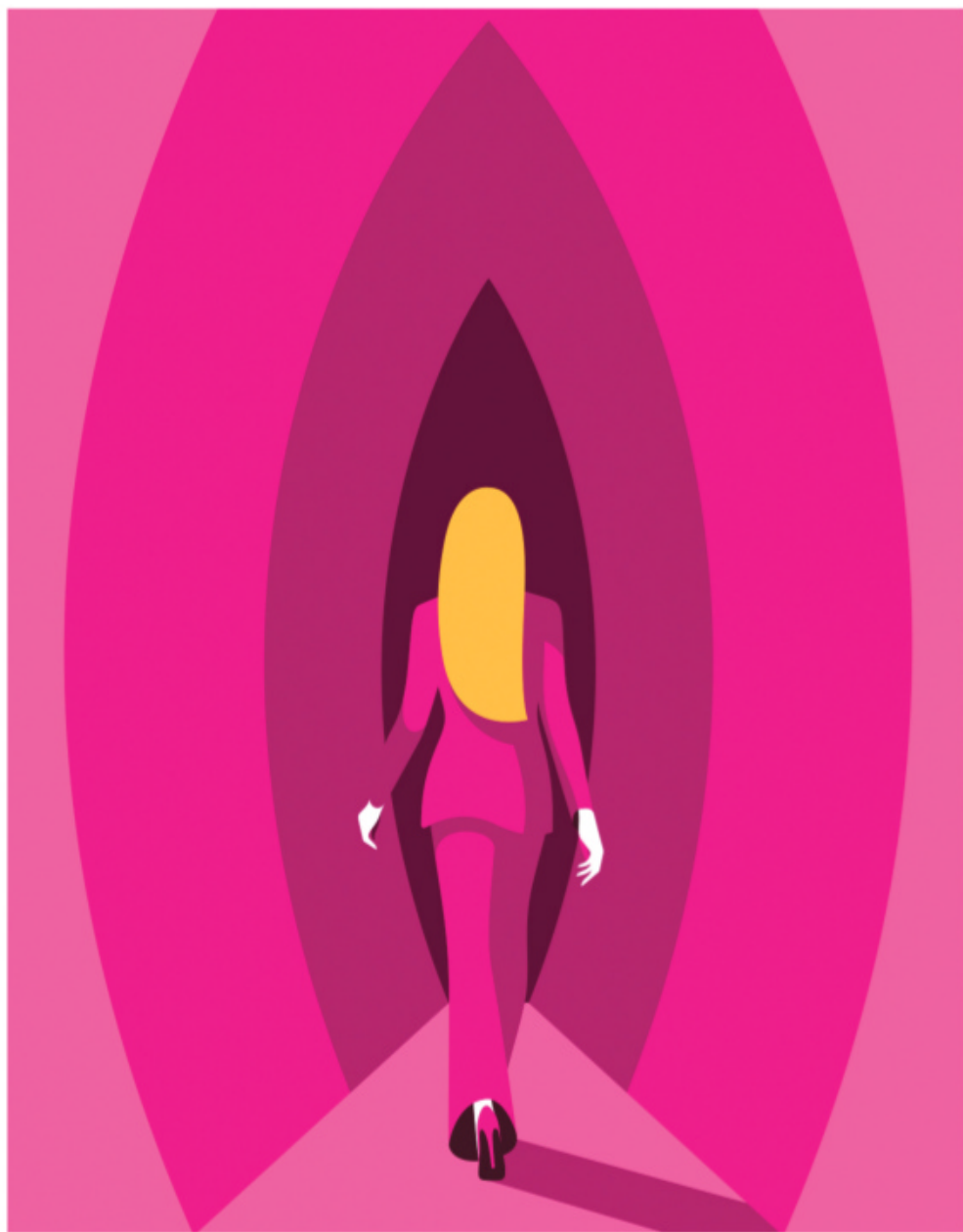
THE
NEW YORKER

ON TELEVISION

MAGICAL THINKING

"The Goop Lab" on Netflix.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



In the cover story of the February issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, Gwyneth Paltrow—photographed wearing a Tom Ford fuchsia “anatomical breastplate”—announced, not for the first time, that she will “literally never” star in a film again. How could empty days spent emoting compare to the constant spiritual high of building a multipronged, culturally influential “wellness” empire, in a sun-choked office in Santa Monica? Don’t call Paltrow an actor; she is an entrepreneur. She founded her lifestyle company, Goop, in 2008, as a recommendations newsletter. Reported to be worth around two hundred and fifty million dollars, it has spawned a Web

site, multiple stores, a magazine, a podcast, cookbooks—and now a slick six-episode series, “The Goop Lab,” for Netflix, that is either the apex or the nadir of infotainment: irresistibly self-aware and personality-obsessed.

Paltrow likes to recall some advice she received in the early days of her venture: that the most successful Internet companies have names featuring double “o”s. “Goop” is perfect. Cradled by Paltrow’s initials, it is ditzy, one antic letter from being dirty, and onomatopoeic. The double “o” also activates warm memories of Oprah. As the face of Goop, Paltrow has a slightly sardonic, cool-girl authority, but “The Goop Lab” suggests

that she, too, is attempting to inspire the kind of unwavering trust we have in Oprah, even when we suspect that the book or the doctor Oprah recommends is not to be trusted. Paltrow, the daughter of Hollywood stars, lacks Oprah’s story, and her race isn’t on her side. But the woman just sold out of a seventy-five-dollar candle called *This Smells Like My Vagina*—are you not entertained? She is an interesting guru, because much of her mythology depends on being hated—for being too rich, too blond, too happy to promote the latest trend. Like Kim Kardashian West, but for a different tribe, Paltrow does not hide from what Taffy Brodesser-Akner has called the “cultural ambivalence” she inspires; instead, she has marshalled it.

What does Goop sell? Its physical inventory may include thousand-dollar cardigans, purses embroidered with the names of dead rappers, crystals cut from pink and green rock, sachets of pulverized herbs that, when steeped, promise to alleviate an array of ills, but its real offering is something more ineffable: what Paltrow calls, on “The Goop Lab,” “optimization of self.” “We’re here one time, one life,” she tells her employees as they sit around a boardroom table in the series’ opening sequence. “How can we really, like, milk the shit out of this?” The rampant spread of wellness culture, dusted with feminist messaging, answers real needs sometimes simply by asserting that they’re legitimate. You *are* overworked, your skin *is* sallow, your humors *are* out of whack. Goop, at its core a sophisticated advertising apparatus, often disseminates useful advice; it also has a way of making *any* advice look potentially useful. In 2018, ten county prosecutors in California sued the company after a consumer watchdog, Truth in Advertising, compiled a report detailing fifty dubious health claims made on the Goop Web site. The most famous involved eggs made of jade and quartz that were advertised as preventing uterine prolapse when inserted into the vagina. Goop paid a hundred and forty-five thousand dollars in fines and had to offer refunds. The promotional images for “The Goop Lab,” which feature a grinning Paltrow floating in a pink vulva, are a funny nod to the brand’s controversial status. (A disclaimer prefacing

Lowbrow, with high production values, “The Goop Lab” is a soulful kind of sponcon.

each episode reads, “The following series is designed to entertain and inform—not provide medical advice.”)

Like other celebrity vanity projects—Beyoncé’s “Life Is But a Dream” comes to mind—“The Goop Lab” is a documentary in name only. Executive-produced by Paltrow, it is propaganda for the Goop company and for its ideas of magical thinking. Every living thing and inanimate object is lit as if from within—or through the Instagram Paris filter. Paltrow’s young, mostly female employees are preternaturally attractive, a well-apportioned mixture of races, sexualities, ethnicities, and temperaments. Montages shot in what we are presumably meant to refer to as “the lab” show them busily brainstorming, typing, and meeting—but never too busily; this is, after all, a healthy workplace culture, an office so clean and so bright that no one would want to leave it.

The boss is most often seen draped over a rose-colored couch, forefinger and thumb forming an “L” on her temple. Beside her is Elise Loehnen, Goop’s competent, oddly affectless chief content officer and Paltrow’s personal consigliere and sometime foil. (“What could possibly be wrong with you?” Loehnen asks Paltrow, mimicking her critics. “You have everything!”) Together they interview experts, often characters familiar to followers of Goop, who tend to form a dyad: one is usually an alternative health practitioner, and the other is a licensed professional, there to buttress the practitioner’s claims. In the first episode, “The Healing Trip,” Paltrow recalls the clarity she attained while taking MDMA “once in Mexico.” Of course, she could not possibly ingest any drugs on her own show, but she can deploy her employees, or “Goopers,” as satellites for the Goop mission. Loehnen is fully on board, ready to display her fealty by flying, with Paltrow’s assistant, Kevin Keating, and two other team members, to Jamaica for a psychedelic mushroom-tea ceremony. “This is a sacrament,” the instructor says, “so we can be with the spirit of the mushroom.” We watch as the employees trip. Overcome by memories of past losses, two of them cry hysterically, while Loehnen naps on a yoga mat. The team emerges clear-eyed, forever changed.

“The Goop Lab,” lowbrow TV with

high production values, is the most unsettling kind of sponcon—the soulful kind. Wim Hof, a popular healer who, following the death of his wife, came to believe in the salutary benefits of breathing exercises and immersion in freezing water, teaches a group of Goopers “snowga.” A bodywork expert asks several employees to lie down on massage tables, and then, like a puppeteer, pulls at the air above them as they writhe, moan, and weep. In every episode, the skeptics are converted, and the believers are reaffirmed.

If “intuiting” and “energy fields” are not your bag, you were never going to be swayed by “The Goop Lab”—although I confess that, after watching, I did take one, brief, ice-cold shower. True believers in alternative therapies might be put off by the show’s efficient portrayals of “healing”—breathing exercises on the grass, for instance, that lead to instantaneous catharsis. The show’s queasiest, most Oprah-y moments involve the testimonies of regular people, meaning people who would likely never read or buy anything from Goop. They are filmed, styled and dressed like Goopers, sitting alone, on designer chairs, with the white lab in the background. An Iraq War veteran who for years suffered from P.T.S.D. reports that MDMA therapy eliminated his suicidal ideation. A man diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome claims that the cold-water therapy restored his full range of movement; he can now do a split.

And yet, when “The Goop Lab” winks at its own absurdity viewers are in more danger of being entertained, even moved. “The Pleasure Is Ours,” an episode about female orgasms, is great TV and genuinely educational, largely thanks to the charismatic and rightly militant ninety-year-old sex educator Betty Dodson, who, since the seventies, has led group workshops for women determined to find sexual satisfaction, in which she requires that they study their own and one another’s vulvae. (“We used to say that a woman had to learn how to ‘run the fuck,’” she says.) The episode comes with its own exposure therapy, in the form of a montage of photographs featuring vulvae. Later, Dodson assists a colleague as she demonstrates the “rock and roll” masturbation technique. I’d never seen a woman coming to orgasm filmed that way, with such lack of fetishism. For a moment, I was thoroughly Gooped. ♦

THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE FIELD.

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CLASS TRIP

"The Gentlemen" and "Color Out of Space."

BY ANTHONY LANE

It's an old story. A smart American, blessed with ambition and style, finds a sweet slot in the upper reaches of the British class system. Think of Fred Astaire's sister and dance partner, Adele, who married a son of the Duke of Devonshire, in 1932, and became Lady Cavendish. (Her husband died of drink.) As for Meghan Markle, she aimed

on land owned by English noblemen—who, needless to say, are desperate for cash, being far poorer than Mickey himself. He may dress like a countryman of yore, in flat caps and tweed jackets the color of marmalade, and we first see him ordering "a pint and a pickled egg" in a pub, but don't be fooled. His business, should you wish to acquire it, can



Guy Ritchie's film is not quite a mystery, or an action flick, or a comedy.

higher still and hit a prince, though the pleasure seems to have palled; in regard to the Royal Family, she and her spouse apparently wanted to be half in, half out, a position that is no more popular with constitutional experts than it is with midwives.

Now we have Mickey Pearson (Matthew McConaughey), the drawling hero of "The Gentlemen," which is written and directed by Guy Ritchie. Mickey has risen from humble stock to the ram-parts of wealth, having lost every grain of humility along the way. We learn that he came to England as a Rhodes Scholar; that he sold drugs to the idle youths of Oxford; and that he then graduated to the major league, cultivating cannabis on vast underground farms,

be yours for four hundred million pounds. Meghan Markle married into the wrong family.

The bulk of the film is told in flashback by Fletcher (Hugh Grant), a private investigator, who has dug into Mickey's past and plans to present his findings to Big Dave (Eddie Marsan), the editor of the *Daily Print*. (Is that really the best title for a newspaper that Ritchie could dream up?) However, as Fletcher explains to Raymond (Charlie Hunnam), Mickey's fixer, he will, for a small fee, keep the dirt to himself rather than pass it on to Big Dave. "Small" means twenty million pounds. But Mickey is too busy to be blackmailed. He has two potential buyers sniffing around: an American named

Matthew (Jeremy Strong) and a dapper Chinese gangster called Dry Eye (Henry Golding). But which of them to trust? Maybe neither?

"The Gentlemen" is a mongrel of a movie. There are not enough twists and tangles for a proper mystery, not enough thrills for an action flick, and not enough laughs for a comedy, though I did enjoy the sight of Fletcher jumping over low hedges like a little boy. So what is Ritchie up to? Indulging an odd but selective obsession with the strata of British society, I'd say, delighting in the lofty and the lowly, and not bothering with the folks in between. (For a subtler journey through such gradations, I recommend "The League of Gentlemen," a British caper from 1960, about a gang of ex-soldiers, of varying ranks, who perpetrate a heist; in the opening shot, one of them emerges from a manhole, clad in a tuxedo, and gets into a Rolls-Royce.) "The Gentlemen" leaps from rolling rural estates to South London projects—neither location, to be honest, is particularly convincing—and reaches its apogee in Laura (Eliot Sumner), a lord's daughter, whose blue blood is tintured with heroin, and who has to be rescued from a nest of junkies.

To examine a bunch of stills from "The Gentlemen" would be like leafing through a menswear catalogue. The autumn collection, I fancy. Yet a genuine seediness spills from the edges of the plot. A typical conversation runs like this: "What am I guilty of?" "Being a cunt." People snicker at an Asian guy named Phuc—isn't that genius?—and Fletcher even tries out his old-school impersonation of Oriental speech. Matthew, a billionaire, is referred to as "the Jew." Grimmiest of all is a head-to-head in a gym. One man calls another "You black cunt," whereupon the two of them stand there and discuss the phrase, weighing up exactly how racist it is.

Ritchie, no doubt, would argue that these are fictional figures talking, and that he is merely representing regular chaffing and chat. (In one respect, he's right. In Britain, unlike in America, the C-word is commonly and lavishly traded between men as a term of genial mockery.) But make no mistake, "The Gentlemen" is a nasty piece of work, topped off with a layer of homophobia; the more camp your character, the more

likely you are to end up as a plaything of fate. In short, the movie is baiting us, praying that we will take offense, and challenging us to flinch. First person to whine is a wuss.

No wonder so many members of the cast have an air of confusion. McConaughey, usually a fount of confidence, looks somewhat baffled and beached as Mickey, and I regret to report that, in the part of his foulmouthed wife, Michelle Dockery is no more plausible than she was as the cool-tongued Lady Mary, in “Downton Abbey.” As for Henry Golding, it’s hard to take him seriously as a gangster when he comes across as slightly less frightening than a spring lamb. So who *does* redeem this unsavory tale? Colin Farrell, for one, who plays a trainer at the gym, radiating energy like sweat. Watch him in a café, when somebody pulls a knife on him. He swats it aside as if it were a paper napkin.

Above all, we have Hugh Grant, whose hilariously fruitful middle age shows no sign of decay. Having been a model of uxorious devotion, aghast with gallantry, in “Florence Foster Jenkins” (2016); a thespian avenger, in “Paddington 2” (2017); and, on TV, a party political leader enmeshed in his own lies, in “A Very English Scandal” (2018), he now sinks his teeth into the role of Fletcher with understandable glee. The thing to remember here is that Grant is no friend of the British tabloids, which he has successfully sued for defamation; when they were accused of hacking private phones, he became a prominent voice in the chorus of complaint. The full force of his venom, you feel, feeds into his portrayal of Fletcher, a profes-

sional snoop, from the smoky shade of his spectacles and the snivelling mewl of his accent to his pitiful goatee, which could well be a cheap disguise. Grant, in other words, has fun with his own loathing, transforming it into a minor work of dramatic art, like a mason carving a gargoye. That takes class.

To say that Nicolas Cage seems unhinged in his new movie, “Color Out of Space,” is to give nothing away. Many moons have waxed and waned, after all, since Cage last gave a performance that could accurately be described as hinged. No longer content with alarming us, he now takes himself by surprise, much as Peter Lorre—a previous master of the wild-eyed—used to give himself the shivers. What distinguishes the latest Cage freak-out is the care with which it’s paced; not until halfway through does he start to lose his hinge, and, even when his face is sprayed with blood, he keeps his glasses on, as if hoping to settle down with a book. Oh, and, if you’ve always wanted to watch him milk an alpaca, your time has come.

Cage plays Nathan Gardner, a loving family man. He lives in the woods with his wife, Theresa (Joely Richardson), and their children. The oldest is Lavinia (Madeleine Arthur), whose hobbies include pagan rituals. Then comes Benny (Brendan Meyer) and, last, young Jack—played by Julian Hilliard, who has already starred in “The Haunting of Hill House” (2018) and will appear later this year in “The Conjuring 3: The Devil Made Me Do It.” I hope he gets plenty of fresh air.

One night, a meteorite lands outside the Gardner residence. It glows a

violent purple-pink, a hue that proceeds to spread over the entire movie, infecting both flora and fauna, as well as the visions that explode in the characters’ minds. Audiences, I predict, will be divided between the elderly, who came of age in the nineteen-sixties and will view the film as an act of regroovification, and fortysomethings who used to be fans of My Little Pony and still have a special place in their hearts for Twilight Sparkle—the pinky-purple nag par excellence.

The movie springs from an H.P. Lovecraft story of the same name, which is considerably scarier, stealthier, and more scientifically detailed than what we observe onscreen. The director is Richard Stanley, who is best known for having tried, for three or four whole days, to take charge of “The Island of Dr. Moreau” (1996), before the strain of coping with Marlon Brando and Val Kilmer became too much. In the new film, we glimpse Brando on TV, which suggests that Stanley may never be able to exorcise him, although “Color Out of Space” is sufficiently festooned with lunatic excesses of its own. The cat named G-spot, for instance. The fingers that are chopped instead of carrots (“Dinner’s ready!”). The adult and child who get fused together, like vertebrae, back to back. The tomato-hurling scene. The strangely Trumpian hand gestures to which Nathan resorts in his psychedelic rage. And the moment when he shouts at his daughter, “I’ve *had* it. With your *drama*. Lavinia.” Really? Where does she get it from, I wonder? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Hartley Lin, must be received by Sunday, February 2nd. The finalists in the January 20th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 17th & 24th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“It’s like you’re not even trying to shovel on beat.”
Jon Morgan, Glen Ridge, N.J.

“This one’s about a man who wouldn’t buy a snowblower.”
William Coyle, Queens, N.Y.

“I didn’t say I would help. I said I’d accompany you.”
Mark Paladini, Los Angeles, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



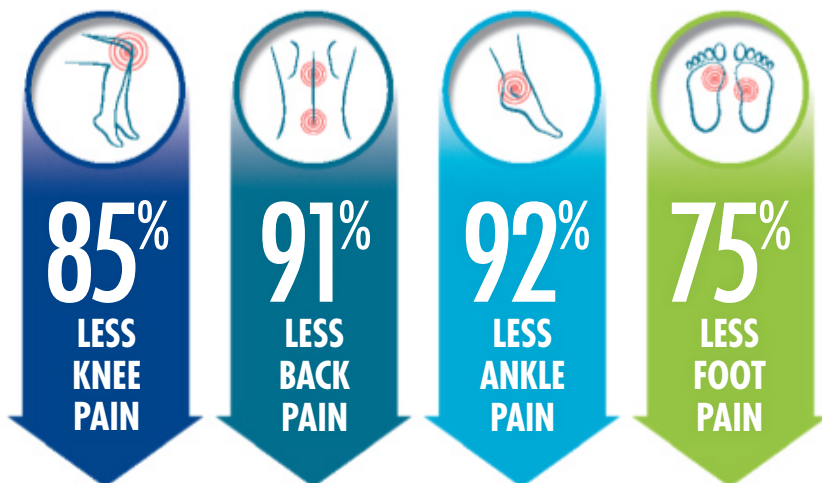
“I’ll take this and the granny dress.”
Maria A. Sullivan, Winchester, Mass.

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